A Dramaturgy of Autobiographical Fragments: Theatre, Autobiography, and Walter Benjamin

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Abstract

This exegesis documents a creative engagement with some of Walter Benjamin’s key ideas concerning time, history and politics. My engagement with his life and work provided me with a basis for developing a creative strategy that I call a *dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments*. It constitutes a new methodology for creating theatrical work that reassembles lived experience from autobiographical fragments: documents, photographs, sound recordings, clothes, books, memories, words.

Benjamin’s own commentaries and objects are dispersed into various collections, assemblages, anthologies and archives. The book *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, a representation of thirteen aspects of the Walter Benjamin Archive in Hamburg, gives clear expression to Benjamin’s mode of collecting and creating. It gathers together an extraordinary range of ephemeral materials: jottings, doodles, constellations, autograph manuscripts, observations, toys, postcards, and lists. I have developed a theatrical method that has affinities with this agglomerative approach:

> … Benjamin’s archives reveal the passions of the collector. The remains heaped up in them are reserve funds or something like iron reserves, crucial to life, and which for that reason must be conserved. These are points at which topicality flashes up, places that preserve the idiosyncratic registrations of an author, subjective, full of gaps, unofficial.¹

I am interested in Benjamin’s commentary on storytelling, non-linear history, the fragment, the aura of artefacts and his metaphorical use of the *constellation*. “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars”, he wrote, asserting that ideas are representations of phenomena, their virtual arrangement.² I explore ideas and objects in these terms, seeking new resonances and flashes of personal and historical insight in the creation of theatrical autobiography.

A fragment in *The Arcades Project* describes my approach to this work:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.3

The work of developing a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments grew out of and culminated in the performance project, *The Tragic Suicide of Walter Benjamin, The Well Known Academic Psychologist*. This presented a constellation of ideas, objects and techniques that enabled me to engage with questions of history, family and subjectivity. This exegesis firstly contextualises the research that informed the creative work; secondly, it describes the practical techniques and strategies used to create the performance work; and, thirdly, it illustrates a method for others interested in exploring personal history and contexts, drawing on their own art forms and skills.

This research constitutes an artistic exploration of autobiographical performance that uses theatrical technique as a mode of intellectual enquiry, putting ideas to the test through writing and in performance. The iterations of journaling, editing, writing and performing create a non-linear weave that reflects the complexity of lived experience, thought and action. A dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments grows out of the application of ideas inspired by Walter Benjamin, and creates a flexible technique for developing autobiographical performance in the theatre.

The research is expressed through the performance, and the exegesis, and for that reason the script of the play accompanies the exegesis here in a detailed, annotated form. An archival DVD recording of the performance is also provided.

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Photo 1. The pleasures of dancing in chaos. (F Hogan, La Mama, February 2012)
Introduction

In broad terms, this exegesis provides the critical and creative context for the autobiographical monodrama, *The Tragic Suicide Of Professor Walter Benjamin, The Well-Known Academic Psychologist*.\(^4\) It describes the scholarship that informed the work’s creation and it investigates the live theatrical performance of autobiography as a mode of research, performative interrogation and creation of the self.

I address Walter Benjamin’s work\(^5\) by presenting a model of exploration through live performance that is predicated on the presence of autobiographical performer. Benjamin’s writing of his own life is performative in ways that challenge the current limits of autobiographical performance theory. His explorations of history, time, culture, and society address individual agency and political change. His writings explore ordinary and heightened experience through objects, collecting, photographs, montage and citation, and inform my compositional strategies for performance. The writings also shed light on the specific, non-reproducible aspects of theatrical performance, providing particular ways to explore creativity, individuality and the social characteristics of immediacy, contradiction and combinations of experience. I use my script, performance, and research, to advocate, in Benjamin’s terms, for unrealised and incomplete projects of history, exploring my own autobiography and family history, over-layering lives in time and space, combining them with the depth and complexity of Benjamin’s ideas.

This research is an iterating process that moves in many directions. The autobiographical performer touches on a range of biographies, and seeks insight into and from each of them. I present my life experience in autobiographical performance,


representing myself, Benjamin and others. The model for an aesthetic of fragmentation and multiple layers and framings comes from Benjamin’s work, and is applied to the patterns of my life. My family history is peopled by idiosyncratic artists who represent their experiences in writings as varied as the song lyric, poetry, journalism, and documentary history. I use my grandfather, Bartlett Adamson (communist, writer, and poet) and my father Rodric Adamson (communist and film editor), layering their presences with those of myself, Bertolt Brecht, and especially Walter Benjamin. I bring all these figures together in a creative constellation of political and artistic experiences, representing and re-enacting them in order to revive discarded ideas and lives, setting up new resonances, inspired by Benjamin’s belief and hope that historical moments exist as possibilities in the present, although they are usually missed: ‘…every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably’, he writes. Various forms of Marxist thought and activism, from Benjamin and Brecht’s idiosyncratic forms to the Stalinist era of Australian communism inhabited by my father and grandfather, and on through New Left variants of the later 20th century, link the lives I represent, and I am exploring how they have influenced my own subjectivity.

Political activism has played an important role in my family for generations: communist activity in the 1930s and 40s, opposition to the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s, and enthusiasm for the Latin American revolutions of recent decades. It has shaped a large part of my life experience, and is reflected in my approach to theatre and acting. My connection with Benjamin began with a study of Bertolt Brecht, whose artistic and theoretical work I have engaged with for decades. Brecht is a presence in my play, and an influence, most importantly in what I think of as the Brecht test: is this play suggesting how things could be, or is it merely showing the reality we already know? However, this research is not primarily concerned with explaining a Brechtian dramaturgy. My aim has been to contribute a new dramaturgy to the theatre that draws on Walter Benjamin’s approach to text and narrative, and history. Walter Benjamin adds a different sensibility to Brecht’s dramaturgy and politics, balancing cosmic indifference with revolutionary dreams of change, and existential despair with literary

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and linguistic play. He is the model for the performativity of this project, which represents history in the present, and shapes the self in the act of performance.

*Performativity* is a crucial but unstable word and concept in this exegesis, as elsewhere. Austin’s usage of the term informs my contention that performative statements are themselves acts. The concept of performativity encompasses both the normative repetitions of daily life and the possibilities of escaping these. In the context of creating autobiographical performance, I emphasise, with Jill Dolan, the transformative possibilities of performativity. That is, the ways that ‘utopian performatives make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better.’

Dolan draws a link between utopian performatives, the *gestus* of Bertolt Brecht, and the rehearsals for revolution of Agosto Boal:

> Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this ‘now’ of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later [sic].

In theatre gestures never quite repeat, and this matches the utopia that can never be reached. As Dolan writes:

> At the base of the utopian performative’s constitution is the inevitability of its disappearance; its efficacy is premised on its evanescence. Performance’s poignant ephemerality grounds all our experience at the theatre.

The development of my project has been performative in this sense. I always feel I am at the beginning, again, in every step of the work. In the moment it is meaningful; at the next, meaning has to be created again. In writing, as in performance, a whole life, whether Benjamin’s or my grandfather’s, appears ephemeral. Paradoxically I see this

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9 ibid., p. 7.
10 ibid., p. 8.
frailty when I view much of Benjamin’s work: that the meaning of his life resides more in the traces and implications of his presences than in his theoretical declarations. His notations of experience resemble the documentary traces that remain after live theatrical performance. His life remains in often haunting artifacts: records of childhood language, drug-induced doodles and jottings, photographs and visual oddities, and early lists and drafts of all sorts of material. Walter Benjamin’s Archive: Images, Texts, Signs, a book drawing on various categories of materials in the Walter Benjamin Archive in Hamburg, serves as a model for my performance. This intricate and visually detailed book is themed around different categories of ideas, writings, and objects. It reproduces archives of lists, scraps, plans, Russian toys, observations, notebooks, picture postcards, graphic forms (diagrams, doodles, suggested constellations), materials for the Arcades project, puzzles and word games, and as a final mystery, eight postcards of the mosaic Sybils of Siena, whose presence in Walter Benjamin’s collections is obscure and open to interpretation.11 It is the range of performative writing and the act of creating himself shown here and in many other books that makes Benjamin’s work so central to my own, as he shapes a huge range of fragments into coherent and malleable collections in an open-ended synthesis. I do not quarry him for appropriate misappropriations, ironically fulfilling his dream of disembodied quotations, so much as I draw from his range of forms and topics a model for autobiographical creation. Autobiography as the willing act of self-creation expresses the belief in agency. I view his life as an exemplary struggle to create himself in his own image.

My project also explores the methodological implications of Benjamin’s work for generating performance-based research. Benjamin submitted The Origins of German Tragic Drama as his habilitation thesis, and the examiners apparently wrote that they could not understand a word of it.12 The ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ that introduces it, today considered by many Benjamin scholars to be one of his most complex and important pieces,13 argues for the necessary uniqueness of any critical work in formal

11 W Benjamin, Walter Benjamin’s Archive, op. cit.
relation to its object of enquiry, including in its construction of categories of criticism.\textsuperscript{14} He writes of a thesis:

Its method is essentially representation. Method is a digression. Representation as digression – such is the methodological nature of the treatise. The absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic. Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation.\textsuperscript{15}

The critical work must be created with no less originality than an artistic one, and this argument relates to the variety of literary forms that Benjamin explores, uses, and creates: ‘The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea,’ he continues, arguing that fragments are used in the creation of larger works that are not defined by or limited to their materials.\textsuperscript{16}

My development of an autobiographical monodrama centres on the idea that a performer’s body-self gives a particular coherence to the otherwise incoherent stream of fragments that constitute a life. The montage and gathering of objects and ideas, of self and family and Benjamin, are embodied in one performer in a concrete time and place. Within such a performance, a mass of formal and narrative contradictions can be given coherent expression and can engage the creativity of spectators, each of whom may put the experience into patterns that suit them.

Jennifer Wise makes a powerful argument that the growth of popular literacy in Ancient Greece sets the context for the development of theatrical tragedy as the first literary form dependent on writing.\textsuperscript{17} In my experience of European drama, written texts are interwoven with theatrical performance texts. A theatre and performance requiring no relationship to writing is precisely a theatre that is shading into a different form of artistic organization and expression, whether crossing between or residing within

\textsuperscript{14} W Benjamin, \textit{The Origin of German Tragic Drama}, op.cit., pp. 27-56. See in particular pp. 27-29 and 43-44.
\textsuperscript{15} ibid., p. 28.
\textsuperscript{16} ibid., p. 29.
physical theatre, dance, or performance art, for example. This performance-based research started with the development of written work in various modes.

The background for this research was a trip to the Philippines in late 2008 and early 2009, where I explored political and activist theatre, sang Brecht songs in many contexts, and began a journal. This informed the start of the PhD process, with a performance in late March 2009, with Melbourne Workers Theatre, of journal extracts and Brecht songs, accompanied on the piano by Michael Morley.

As I went deeper into my experience of actor processes, I found I was exploring the complexities of autobiographical representation, in writing and in performance. In my theatrical project, writing emerged as central to it: firstly, the project journal that I wrote throughout the years of this research both created and documented my research journey; secondly, fragments and script scenes, many drawn directly from the journal, were developed; thirdly, I selected, edited, rehearsed and performed these written fragments and scenes over a two-year period, and through this process developed the script, which is textually and dramaturgically distinct from the individual fragments and scenes; fourthly, the script itself changed significantly for the three different performance weeks (Deakin, November 2011, 50 minutes; La Mama, February 2012, 90 minutes; and Deakin, June, 2012, 90 minutes); fifthly, the annotated script appended to this exegesis has been comprehensively annotated, including references, dramaturgical notes, and personal reflections (I initially wanted to present this exegesis as a multilayered footnoting and commentary on my performance script, but this proved impossible given candidature requirements); and finally, this exegesis explores the research topic and the performance in an academic mode. These different registers of writing have interacted with each other, imaginatively, in research, and even physically in the performance, as a pile of drafts destroyed a part of the furniture on stage.

The range of subjects, forms involved, registers of writing, aspects of script, performance modes and styles, and the shifts from one mode to another, relate to the evasive and contradictory aspects of any claimed truth, and the shifts of meaning that occur with changes of context and framing. The problems that result require the

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application of an important dramaturgical principle: we should not avoid the difficulties that emerge in rehearsal, but use them: they arise for good reason, and give impetus to the creative process.\textsuperscript{19} Benjamin’s obsessions with the minutiae of objects, thoughts, fragments and ephemera, often considered rubbish to be discarded, and yielding surprising results in his hands, show a similar concern for problematic material that is often avoided or overlooked. The problems of life down to the smallest details constitute the subject matter for a Benjamin-inspired dramaturgy of the fragmentary, the momentary, and the seemingly ephemeral.

Performing the self in live theatrical contexts is a complicated mixture of subjective experience, intuition, and attempts at objective self-appraisal, requiring great attention to detail. Acting involves an objectification of the self to varying degrees, but its guiding force is subjective experience, and the ability to rapidly shift between states of body, emotion, and imagination. Autobiographical performance sheds light on the contradictions of individual and social experience. It contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the dramaturgies and aesthetics of the theatre with its interrogations of the dynamics between the individual and the social. Actor representation often involves linear presentations of the self, but life and time and inner conversations abound in shifts and ellipses and repetitions, and the techniques of the actor can represent these as effectively as they can the character journeys of linear narratives.

Chapter 1 presents a detailed account of the theoretical context of this project. The writings of Walter Benjamin inhabit and inform my creative processes and are literally present in the script and the performance. This chapter discusses Benjamin’s approaches to narrative, his use of the concept of aura, his views of history, and his experimental explorations of aesthetic form. This is potentially an enormous task, as Gershom Scholem pointed out to Georg Steiner, as they discussed ways of exploring and teaching Benjamin’s work, and I describe their wonderfully imaginative plan for a 12-part seminar that would give an historical framework for detailed Benjaminian studies. Steiner’s account of their discussion was an early and continuing inspiration for my

\textsuperscript{19} I first remember becoming fully aware of this principle during the rehearsals for a production of \textit{Twelfth Night}, in discussions with Alex Pinder, a Lecoq-trained actor/director, in 2002.
research and creative project, and I also explain that it was the source for the title of the play.\textsuperscript{20}

I respond to the breadth of Benjamin’s work, to his autobiographical and performative attempts to alter his circumstances and the world around him, by presenting myself elliptically and through others. His juxtapositions, tangents and contradictions model the discontinuities and gaps in my theatrical explorations. I also ground this research on concepts of agency and equality, briefly discussing Jacques Rancière and his axiomatic view of equality.\textsuperscript{21} I also turn later to Rancière for the claims he makes in his essay ‘The Emancipated Spectator’ with regard to the potential creative agency and intelligence of any theatre audience member. These claims underpin the logic of swift changes of position, point of view, topic, and theatricality in a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments, and my assumption that spectators can and will engage with these.\textsuperscript{22}

The chapter continues with a discussion of the theorising of autobiographical monodrama, and how this relates to a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments. Often written from a feminist perspective, autobiographical performance theorists have tended to be concerned with activist performative assertions of marginal identities. My interest in this perspective arises from its political intentions, and I consider its limits, where the marginal becomes individual, and identity seems to fragment, as in my work. I look closely at Deirdre Heddon’s \textit{Autobiography and Performance}, which summarises many issues in this field.\textsuperscript{23} Although I do not have the intention or the space in this exegesis to present a history of autobiographical performance-making, I discuss the exemplary work of Spalding Gray, foundational for the positioning of autobiographical monologue or \textit{auto-performance} as a powerful genre that can draw specifically on the skills of the actor, however personal and non-theatrical this genre might appear to be. I give an account of Evelyn Hinz’s argument that biography and autobiography have more in common with Aristotelian drama than with the novel, one that deserves serious consideration. I pay attention to Philippe Lejeune’s recent writings on diaries, journals, and other fragmentary forms, because of his sensitivity to their performative origins and

\textsuperscript{21} Referenced below in Chapter 1.
possibilities. His explorations coincide with the huge growth of the autobiographical in popular culture, and the popularity of confession, testimony, and the public expression of emotion. Eva Illouz has described the emotional capital required to function in today’s complex, market-driven world, and the public and private emotional competencies needed. This poses problems for the performative status of activist autobiography and monodrama addressed by Heddon, and I discuss her concerns that activist autobiography may have been trumped by actor opportunism.

Chapter 2 focuses on my development of the performance script out of many fragments of theory, memory, and practice. I consider the genesis and development of the script, and the particular process of journal writing that underlay it, essential to this project—more than 50 exercise books, handwritten, and well over 100,000 words. I discuss Walter Benjamin’s uses of history, time, and objects, and his performative, experimental, autobiographical writing. Rather than use autobiography to assert a particular identity, evasion in tension with revelation is my most significant response to Benjamin in shaping the content of my life for theatrical representation. I use Benjamin and others to say what I cannot say about myself directly, seeking self-knowledge in the layering of past viewpoints with present concerns, and giving an explanation of self in the presence of others.

Live theatre performance can present autobiography (my story), and performed autobiography can contribute a new model of investigation of the biographical (the stories of Benjamin, Brecht, and Bartlett and Rod Adamson). I use physical objects, clothing, sound, and my own presence as multiple presences: the history imbued in them, the contexts from which they come, their practical properties on a theatre stage, and their metaphorical and symbolic intimations. Objects can acquire aura in a Benjaminian sense; even a photocopied article can acquire a distinct and original history and presence, and I describe this happening with a copy of Steiner’s discussion with Scholem.

The stuff of life becomes stuff on the stage, my body is a tree in the breeze, the coats represent generations and times long gone but are present themselves as real objects,

25 D Heddon, op. cit., in particular in her ‘Conclusion: These Confessional Times’, pp. 157-172.
and as an actor I slip back and forth through layers of being, character and persona. The most significant aspect of a fluidity of identity in performance, of selves and of objects, is that it allows for suggestive rather than assertive claims about myself, and others, and creates traces of presence. Key to my performance work here is the inhabiting of these traces. I never met my grandfather, but I speak his words, and we are both present on the stage. I do not know what Walter Benjamin’s voice sounded like, and I have been unable to find any reference to extant recordings of him, despite his radio work (almost 90 broadcasts), but I lend him my voice to speak his (translated) texts. I do not try to delineate character psychology. I do not try to keep the personas apart. I want them to merge with each other, allowing my life struggles to be theirs, and theirs mine. They are biographies within my autobiography, and it all becomes my autobiography in the present, for I am alone on the stage.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I explore the articulations of a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments. The techniques of writing, documentation, dramaturgy, use of objects, acting, and presentations of self are all realised in scenes and moments in the play, and are explored in order to develop a distinctive and original Benjaminian dramaturgy. I describe varied forms of writing, the living representations created in theatrical performance, the contradictions and coherences arising from the relations between these forms, and the iterations involved in this theatrical process. Benjamin’s work and writings provide a valuable model of autobiographical performativity and a dynamic model for further theatrical, pedagogical, and intellectual explorations, that bring him once more into his now-time of the present.

Chapter 1: Walter Benjamin, Jacques Rancière, and Theorists of Autobiography

Photo 2. 78rpm record of WWI gas shelling; Decca Trench model 78 player; Mystery Gold by Bartlett Adamson; Walter Benjamin’s Archive; Rembrandt self-portrait; Sydney bus driver’s raincoat 1983; David in ‘Walter’s coat’ (G D’Cruz, Deakin, June 2012)

Walter Benjamin

My investigation of actorly processes in this project is intensely autobiographical, and as it developed I was drawn more and more to the story of Walter Benjamin’s own life. At first this seemed a simple matter of historical interest and personal taste, but my research supervisor began to challenge such easy assumptions. What was it about Benjamin that drew me to his life and thought? Were similar interests, temperament and enquiry merely accidental? As the resonances and affinities between Walter Benjamin and myself became more obvious, the outlines of a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments, with its emphasis on objects, physical metaphor, and the layering of selves began to emerge, and the connection of these elements with the specifics of our personal histories suggested a strong relationship between the forms of storytelling and their autobiographical content.
Benjamin’s interests reflect his biographical origins. He was born into a family of prosperous Jewish background. His father was at one time an antiques dealer. Education was valued, and Walter expected to live a professional life based on financial support from his family. He attended a progressive school where he studied German literature with Gustave Wyneken, an important influence on the youth movement of the time. He became a well-known student leader, writing articles and giving speeches, arguing that adults wore experience as a mask, but that youth could know a different, more authentic experience. He was involved with socialist and Zionist organisations but did not agree with the project of a separate Jewish state. He opposed World War I and broke with Wyneken because of the latter’s support of it. He read the revolutionary Marxist Rosa Luxemburg’s Die Internationale and faked symptoms to avoid military service. He became close friends with a wide range of progressive and differing thinkers, including Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem, and later Theodor Adorno, central to the development of Western Marxism, the Latvian communist Asja Lacis, and playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht.  

Benjamin’s autobiographies are extensive and unusual, focused on the physical and emotional intensities of experience, and writings such as One-way Street, Moscow Diary, Berlin Childhood, and the drug protocols are good examples of this. His ideas are articulated experimentally through fragments, radio broadcasts, books, articles and travel diaries, in various forms based on aphorism, impression, montage, objects, photographs and imaginative representations of childhood memory. Extensive diary entries not published in his lifetime, and other previously unpublished notes, show his ongoing struggles with work, love and depression, and I draw on these extensively in the performance because of my own affinities with the experiences portrayed. They describe the life and thoughts of a person who questions everything. His writings, his

30 These can be explored by browsing W Benjamin, Selected Writings Volumes 1-4, and Walter Benjamin’s Archive, op. cit.  
intellectual interests, his relationship with the physical world, and his interventions in culture and society show the prominence embodied experience plays in his philosophical and political conceptions. They show us an unconventional thinker in cultural, theological, and political terms, one who values contradiction and who never commits to a single world-view. Benjamin’s valuing of the role of observer and critic-participant influences the reflexivity of my theatrical project.

Benjamin’s celebration of new, original forms, and his suggestions that form, content, commentary and the context of an active engagement or project are intensely and creatively linked, is a model for the inter-related aspects of my research, as I strive to excavate my own life and find meaning in it. He writes:

Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter ... A good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through.32

This return over and over to the same material cannot simply be biographical, and the strata that need to be broken through change, or are added to, with every approach. I read his whole oeuvre as the performative, self-creating autobiography of his continuing struggle to exist, full of ideas and forms that are highly theatrical. Many of Benjamin’s writings are directly autobiographical, and the rest seem to bear an autobiographical intent, the performative act of creating himself as one who writes meaningful, important, and original work. ‘The goal is that I be considered the foremost critic of German literature’, he writes to Gershom Scholem on January 20, 1930. Given his major struggles with suicide the following year, his very life is threatened when this vision falters. His suicidal diary entries of May-June 1931 are followed in July by his

key essay ‘Unpacking My Library’, a paean to himself as collector, and it is this performative quality in Benjamin, this assertion of self through writing, that provides the key to this research and my performance.

The personal aspect of writing is often in the forefront of Benjamin’s work. From his early ‘Curriculum Vitae’, through The Origin of German Tragic Drama, all the way to the final forms of 'On the Concept of History', there is a stress on the individually creative work of the writer, whether in fiction, history or autobiography. In ‘The Author as Producer’ Benjamin demands an awareness of his commentators as to the role that their own work plays in society. He presents ‘the writer with only one demand: the demand to think, to reflect on his position in the process of production.’  

In an early draft of 'On the Concept of History', Benjamin writes of the historian:

‘He grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time.’

The individual can grasp key moments and affect their outcomes. He expresses a reflexivity grounded in the personal responsibility and authenticity of the writer’s experience, and even relates it to the concept of aura, best known from his essay ‘The Work of Art’, where he relates it to his conceptions of time and space:

In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. This history includes changes to the physical structure of the work over time, together with any changes in ownership.
Significantly for my use of objects, discussed in later chapters, he footnotes this with the comment:

Of course, the history of a work of art encompasses more than this. The history of the *Mona Lisa*, for instance, encompasses the kinds and number of copies made of it in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.37

This would mean that specific reproductions (although manual), can acquire an aura. He continues:

The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity... One might encompass the eliminated element within the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura.38

Note, as Georg Steiner remarks:

Benjamin was not, in any technical sense, a philosopher. Like other lyric thinkers, he chose from philosophy those metaphors, dramas of argument and intimations of systematic totality – whether Platonic, Leibnizian or Crocean – which best served, or rather which most suggestively dignified and complicated his own purpose.39

Terms such as *aura*, *now-time*, and *constellation* are applied by Benjamin to a range of contexts and are often difficult to pin down (much as is Brecht’s use of the term *gestus*). Benjamin can equate aura with an authenticity of presence that bears striking resemblance to contemporary discussions of authenticity of presence in live theatre. He applies it to objects and works of art in here-space and now-time. He also applies it to writing, in a discussion of Leskov, in ‘The Storyteller’:

37 ibid., note 3, p. 271.
38 ibid., pp. 253, 254
For he is granted the ability to reach back through a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but much of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to what is most his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to relate his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the incomparable aura [Stimmung] that surrounds the storyteller, in Lesko as in Hauff, in Poe as in Stevenson. If one keeps silent, it is not only to listen to [the storyteller] but also, in some measure, because this aura [ce halo] is there. The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.40

Walter Benjamin conveys the idea that the storyteller is both the experience and the expression of his life, including all second-hand, hearsay experience, and this idea informs my creative work and my own autobiography. Life consumed by story would seem to apply to Walter’s own writing. Here the storyteller is the original work that contains the aura, not the story, and this has implications for the ontological status of live performance. A living process becomes an object, or perhaps a commodity. Aura may express the human qualities of a work, and the human individual may be the most auratic of all. I see a connection here between the concept of aura and the body and presence of the unique performers and audience members in the theatre.

In the performativity of the unfinished Arcades Project, and its elevation of the principle of quotation, we see the connection between Benjamin and Brecht: the citable gesture, the gestus. In ‘What Is Epic Theatre? (II)’ Benjamin writes:

… interruption is one of the fundamental devices of all structuring. It goes far beyond the sphere of art. To give only one example, it is the basis of quotation. Quoting a text involves interrupting its context. It is therefore understandable that the epic theatre, being based on interruption, is, in a specific sense, a quotable form of drama. There is nothing special about the quotability of its texts. The difference lies in the gestures which are built into the play … Epic

theatre is by definition a gestic theatre. For the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in acting, the more gestures result.\footnote{W Benjamin, ‘What Is the Epic Theatre? (II)’, (1939), in Selected Works 4, p.305. This is in a section titled ‘Part V. The Quotable Gesture [Gestus]’.

My play is a montage of fragments that are continually interrupted by other fragments, often quotations. I discuss the physical or materialised metaphors at work in my play later, and these also possess gestic qualities of heightened signification and interruption. These ideas are related to Brecht’s and Benjamin’s own of showing rather than merely explaining, so that the reader or spectator gets to think or imagine the narrative on their own terms. In ‘The Storyteller’ Benjamin writes:

> Actually it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one recounts it. Leskov is a master at this … The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connections among the events are not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.\footnote{W Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, op. cit., p.148.}

To present a story is more important than interpreting it, and if interpreted in the telling or performing, as is often done by psychologistic approaches to acting, the audience can’t engage with it or remember it, because too much of the imaginative work has been done for them. I take this view further: if a narrative is too smooth and too linear, then interpretation is often imposed on the audience simply by the expectations of narrative and formal causality. I believe the presentation of story and autobiography is heightened by an interplay of text and context, as I attempt to do in my play, and this interrupted pattern, as much as the fragments themselves, is a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments at work. The arrangement of fragments becomes an individual synthesis in the interpretation of each member of the audience. The nonlinear presentation of narrative, texts, and personas is balanced by the singular presence of the performer, and by the choices of form that derive from the particular performer’s skills, passions and knowledge. A synthesis is guessed at or slowly discovered in rehearsal and performance
by the performer, and a different synthesis is created by each engaged audience member.

Walter Benjamin provides an unusual model of autobiography in tension with the politics and projects of his times. Although he attempted to make a place for himself within academia, and then focused on the aim of becoming the pre-eminent literary critic of his time, his professional struggles also had to do with his lifelong political concerns: for youth and student rights, for new forms of literature and theatre, and for revolutionary political struggle. In each of these areas he refused to follow the orthodoxies of his times. He shifted between philosophy and theory, narratives of the self, and the performative writing of history. The *Encyclopedia of Life-Writing* lists Benjamin as 'autobiographer and critic', stating of his work that ‘history – public and private – is experienced by the wanderer and collector travelling and decoding the enigmas of place and self.’ Others characterise ‘Benjamin’s narratives as “archaeological montage” … they “offer a singularity of experience and transgression in which the history of the self is inseparable from the history of its culture” ’.

In *One-way Street*, Benjamin articulates our lives in these terms:

Omens, presentiments, signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses. To interpret them or to use them, that is the question. The two are irreconcilable. Cowardice and apathy counsel the former, lucidity and freedom the latter. For before such prophecy or warning has been mediated by word or image, it has lost its vitality, the power to strike at our centre and force us, we scarcely know how, to act accordingly. If we neglect to do so, and only then, the message is deciphered. We read it, but it is now too late.

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45 ibid., p.100.
47 ibid.
This concern with the present moment as the locus of conscious action runs throughout Benjamin’s writings. In ‘On The Concept of History’ he writes: ‘The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognisability, and is never seen again.’

This responsibility to act at the moment of possibility is a lifelong concern, traceable back to his student activist days and his demands that the adult world respond to the idealisms of a youthful life hunger. The genesis of ‘On the Concept of History’ itself, often referred to as his final work and ultimate statement, belongs to the period after World War I. Writing to Gretel Adorno in 1940, five months before his death, in response to a request for his ‘theory of progress,’ Benjamin described ‘On the Concept of History’ as unfinished notes:

… probably made following the conversation under the horse-chestnut trees … at a time when such things occupied me. The war and the constellation which brought it about led me to take down a few thoughts which I can say that I have kept with me, indeed kept from myself, for nigh on twenty years … Even today, I am handing them to you more as a bouquet of whispering grasses, gathered on reflective walks, than a collection of theses. The text you are to receive is, in more ways than one, a reduction … I would like to draw your attention particularly to the 17th reflection; that is the one which should make apparent the hidden, yet conclusive connection between these observations and my previous works by offering concise information about the method of the latter. Furthermore, these reflections, as much as their character is an experimental one, do not methodically serve the sole purpose of paving the way for a sequel to the ‘Baudelaire’. They make me suspect that the problem of remembering (and of forgetting), which appears in them on another level, will continue to occupy me for a long time. I need hardly tell that nothing could be further from my mind than the thought of publishing these notes (let alone in the form I am sending them to you). It would be a perfect recipe for enthusiastic misunderstanding.

49 W Benjamin, ‘Experience’, (1913-1914), in Selected Writings 1, pp. 3-5.
50 W Benjamin and G Adorno, op. cit., p. 286.
This is a fascinating letter, given the high status of what is usually treated as his final, profound statement. It is possible that a version of it was the work that went missing at his death, a work he said was more important than he was.\textsuperscript{51} This work had been turning over in Benjamin’s mind for at least two decades, and he considered it unfinished. Its allusive and elusive qualities reflect this: while seeming to address contemporary politics, they remain unbound by them. They are speculations of a high creative order, and I develop my project in a similar, digressive and speculative way, attempting to shed light on my own present times without merely reducing them to my personal experiences.

In ‘Section XVII’ referred to above, which I quote here in full, he attacks conventional notions of history as the aggregation of indisputable, chronological fact. For him, history exists as a present enterprise:

\begin{quote}
Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. It may be that materialistic historiography differs in method more clearly from universal history than from any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently), a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.
\end{quote}

I use these ideas to find new possibilities arising from unexpected combinations. I want to arrest, stop attention at surprising moments. I am interested in Benjamin’s metaphorical use of the \textit{constellation}. “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars”, he wrote, asserting that ideas are representations of phenomena, their virtual

\textsuperscript{51} W Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings 4}, ‘Chronology, 1938-1940’, p. 444.
arrangement. My work explores ideas and objects in these terms, seeking new resonances and flashes of personal and historical insight, and it is for us as readers, spectators and historians to create new syntheses out of the masses of fragments that surround us. This is a source of hope, a mainspring of creative work: things might be different to how they are, personally, or historically: they can be rearranged, and new things can arise.

Benjamin charts a method here that goes far beyond accumulation and juxtaposition, or historical description. He is making an argument that relates in part to the ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’, with its emphasis on the unique act of criticism matched to its object: the specific task of a writer rescuing a moment from the past will, if appropriately realised, have a power that is not dependent on its historical chronology. It is as though time can transform, change direction, become other than it is assumed to be. This heightened language allows for an historical present, where we fight, not merely for interpretations of history, but for the effects of history today, for its realisation in new forms, and for our active, revolutionary agency. In these conceptions of time and history, Benjamin helps us transform our present.

Benjamin is an unorthodox Marxist, even within an unorthodox circle of Marxists, in part because of his refusal to give up hope in the possibilities of revolutionary struggle and transformation. In the face of danger and despair, in the darkest of historical periods in European history, he writes of the historian’s task:

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.

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52 Benjamin, W, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, op. cit., p. 34.
53 ibid., pp. 43-44.
The political implications of Benjamin’s ideas of agency and moments of revolutionary possibility resonate with my own life and that of my family, many of whom have at some stage been left-wing or socialist, revolutionary activists (parents, uncles, grandparents, and siblings). Benjamin’s views of history express a commitment to revolutionary political action, and explain his hesitations to retreat from Europe to the United States of America, with Adorno, or Palestine, with Gershom Scholem. His theses ‘On the Concept of History’ make their own contribution to history: no individual struggle or creation is significant beyond its contribution to what follows; no defeat is wasted if its significance is remembered and its struggle continued in the present.

In Benjamin’s practice the selection of subject and the matching of critique requires detailed attention to origins, qualities, and context. Like Brecht, much of his work takes place in the context of overwhelming danger. What they share is a commitment to a project of cultural struggle in the name of a better and just politics, and they both hold to a belief in the necessities of revolutionary social change, although they dispute orthodoxies of inevitable triumph.55

It is worth quoting Terry Eagleton at some length here, as he balances the contradictions of Benjamin’s life. He writes in 1981, from a Marxist perspective, during a decline of the left after the revolutionary energies of 1968 and the following decade:

Benjamin’s deeply idiosyncratic Marxism displays the traces of his never-jettisoned idealisms; but by the same token it detaches him from Marxist ‘orthodoxy’ to catapult him to a point that we have in some senses yet to arrive at. Caught between the brute pragmatism of a Brecht and the patrician esotericism of an Adorno, he stood in the crossfire of contradictions that no revolutionary intellectual can today escape; indeed, that he incarnated such contradictions so exotically is a major part of his political meaning. For no revolutionary intellectual can today escape the following dilemma: that in the teeth of all forms of ouvrierisme and iconoclasm he or she must exploit the resources of traditional culture to the full, while living in perpetual readiness to

lose absolutely everything of that should it become historically necessary. The intensity with which Benjamin lived this aporia distinguishes him just as much from the sanguine teleology of a Lukacs as it does from the occasional facile philistinism of a Brecht.\textsuperscript{56}

Benjamin’s life is an exemplary one, embodying the impossible contradictions of his time, and ours, but attempting to create something worthwhile out of the impossible choices. Benjamin’s project differs from that of Brecht in that he is a theorist of language and a philosopher of culture more than he is an artist, but there is a similarity in the means employed: radical textual experimentation, and a willingness to take up new materials and methods as they come to hand. Benjamin’s work attracts many people because it is open-ended, dispersive, and incomplete. Fredric Jameson comments that in Brecht, as opposed to Benjamin, ‘there are also completed things from time to time.’\textsuperscript{57} Jameson also has questions:

about the unexpected fortunes and prestige of Walter Benjamin, in a period that has seen the discounting of the stock of most of the other radical thinkers and litterateurs of our period…cannot Benjamin himself be enlisted among the ranks of those for whom theory and abstraction are pernicious? Are not the places of theory, in Benjamin, blinded by the transcendental glare of a whole range of mysticisms; while at its other reach, the passion for philosophy as such is replaced by the fiches of history, abstraction and concept by quotations and curious, stray facts?\textsuperscript{58}

The methodological implications of his formal and creative attachments to montage have much to do with his current status, as do his concerns with the materiality of objects, and a tendency to express himself in theological terms, but his significance for my project has to do with the far-ranging but incomplete and contradictory qualities in his work that allow for readings from the political to the metaphysical, Marxist to Kabbalist. Michel Löwy, for example, summarises these contradictory readings in \textit{Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’} and then, in his own

\textsuperscript{57} F Jameson, \textit{Brecht and Method}, op. cit., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{58} F Jameson, in \textit{The Ideologies of Theory}, op. cit., p. 265.
interpretation celebrating these contradictions, relates Benjamin to the recent decades of revolutionary activity in Latin America.\textsuperscript{59}

The autobiographical and performative aspects of Benjamin’s work allow for personal and idiosyncratic engagements with many of his ideas. In the performativity his writing shares with theatrical autobiography, Benjamin searches for an authenticity of representation. Many of his writings concern the loss of past authenticities, and relate to a range of art forms and traditions. To return to ‘The Storyteller’, Benjamin writes:

\begin{quote}
One meets fewer and fewer people who know how to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to tell a story is expressed. It is as if a capability that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

My attachments to the theatre, and Benjamin, and Brecht, are largely to do with the sentiments expressed here. I value small-scale, live theatre and song with audiences that are intimate and in human scale with the performance, eschewing large, disproportionate spectacle. There is a knowledge or experience particular to this scale which reflects my autobiography, but which has a broader connection to the historical and documentary value of the particular, which plays back in art: the particular person, document, artwork, artefact, object or possession has its own significance.

My interests in history and historiography and my fascination with Walter Benjamin are shaped by my family background. My mother was a documentary film maker and historian, and, in her 80s, she still enrolled in courses in 19th century history. I studied various history subjects at university as a two-year minor in my arts degree. Central to my whole project was the following piece of printed history, which I refer to a number of times in the play and this exegesis: Georg Steiner, addressing the first Congress of the International Walter Benjamin Association in 1997, outlines a course for a detailed

historical seminar that students should attend before reading a word of Walter Benjamin himself. Steiner was with Gershom Scholem at a café in Bern in 1973, and the course is based on a fanciful discussion of a fictional *Universitat Muri* between Scholem and Walter Benjamin at the end of World War I, which took place at the same table in the same café. Scholem and Steiner imagined a course comprising twelve large, distinct subject areas, grounding Benjamin’s life and work in the Jewish emancipation in 19th century Germany, German youth movements, German pacifism, German language from Luther to romanticism, the academic system, the mentality of the collector, allegory and the baroque, graphology, narcotics (especially hashish), Marxism (including Brecht), translation, eros, and theology.61 Intellectually wide-ranging, this plan highlights the limitations of any biography or autobiographical project based simply on Benjamin himself. Creatively relating him to the present through my own autobiography problematises claims to truly, truthfully or completely represent him, and instead makes a virtue of the necessary incompleteness.

Walter Benjamin suffers historically from the romanticised appeal of his biography as that of an archetypal loner, as though divorced from the history and culture in which he was so intimately and intricately involved. In late 1987 I went to a performance of Brecht’s *Fear and Misery in the Third Reich*, away from the centre of London, upstairs, in a small venue. The young student selling tickets at the table at the top of the stairs told me in conversation that she was a relative of Walter Benjamin. I remember being surprised but pleased on meeting her. At that time I only knew of Benjamin through my engagement with Brecht. In my research for this project I met her again in print. At the same 1997 Benjamin Congress addressed by Steiner, Mona Jean Benjamin, born 1970, said:

… I also remember having conversations with more than one person who would say, ‘no, it’s impossible, because Walter Benjamin had no children, so therefore you can’t be his grand-daughter, you’re lying.’ More than one. So that was odd, sort of how gradually I made contact with other people who had taken on very,

very clear ideas about who he was to them, and obviously his family didn’t play any part in that. They rather liked the lonely tragic figure who had no one left.62

This is a poignant illustration of Benjamin’s theory of history. He needs rescuing, in the present, despite his own performative efforts. Walter Benjamin struggled to create an authentic life at every level. He sought an authenticity in origins and originality, in tangible objects, rare books, artworks and embodied experience (drugs, sex, travel, politics, theatre). He was desperate to preserve this intensity of experience in writing, establishing archives of originals and duplicates around the world (in Germany, France, England, the USA and Palestine).63 Despite his importance as a key modernist writer, I experience much of his work as a lament for the loss of original craft and art forms, and I believe these inform much of his work as a collector. For this reason too I wanted to explore him in the archaic form of live theatre.

Jacques Rancière

Jacques Rancière asserts an axiom of human equality that resists the normative, no matter how progressive it might seem to be. In The Ignorant Schoolmaster he questions the belief that we teach those who do not yet have knowledge in order to raise them to equality. Such teaching replicates distance between teacher and student: the teacher will always know more of what is pronounced worth learning. What matters to Rancière is that we each already possess the capacity to learn.64 In the essay ‘The Emancipated Spectator’ he extends this critique of normative equality to attack the assumption that theatre-makers need to provoke audiences of passive spectators to participate actively in a performance in order to become equal with the creator artists, as assumed in different ways by Brecht, Artaud, performance artists and others:

What our performances – be they teaching or playing, speaking, writing, making art or looking at it – verify is not our participation in a power embodied in the community. It is the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes

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62 ibid., p. 123.
everyone equal to everyone else. This capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations … We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed.65

Rancière defines politics in a sense as the struggle for the time and public space to express oneself, and he celebrates the reality of contested opinions in a world of difference.66 In a recent essay he comments: ‘In the case of my writings one cannot speak of a system.’ He talks rather of the need ‘to select a guiding thread that runs through the stages and domains of an entire body of work.’67 Work itself is the thread that he discusses, with its subjectivities, exclusions, and contestations. In conclusion, he points to:

… the tension which for me remains between aesthetics and politics. This tension relates less to the status of work than to that of willed action. At the heart of aesthetic experience lies the abolition of a whole set of oppositions that are used to structure the sharing/dividing of the sensible: activity/passivity, work/leisure, play/seriousness.68

The major part of the theoretical work explored in my research has been through the processes of script development, rehearsal and live theatrical performance. At each step of the way, as I have tackled issues concerning political theatre, content, representation, and performance, I have depended on my existing skills, knowledge and life experience, my choices shaped by the autobiographical. Brechtian approaches have not answered my deeper questions about the meaningfulness of theatre and its relationships to politics and societal change. I have for decades seen the central problem of politics to be the contradiction between individual experience and broader social realities, and the substitution of cultural or theatrical activism for that of politics does not solve the problem. Political theatre is not simply a matter of content. Theatre is not politics, and

68 ibid., p. 215.
cannot substitute for its processes. Form and artifice matter in relation to context, not least in the constitution of a particular audience of individuals, and a theatrical project that underestimates individual agency repeats political errors.

Rancière writes of the paradox of the audience that ‘there is no theatre without a spectator … But according to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons … To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.’ I believe, with Rancière, that this is incorrect. I never think that I know more than an audience, even about myself. I can only offer my experience, which, like everyone else’s, is unique. I can only ask questions of others that I ask myself. Accordingly my work has been autobiographical at the various levels that theatrical performance makes possible: through content, script, performance, representation, formal experimentation, and context. It is the work of creating ways and forms of expressing my autobiography that makes me able to demand the time and energy of audiences in the watching of it. If we are all unique, what makes this particular artistic work of interest? I want to suggest a balance here between history and the individual, and between autobiographical content and artifice. I do not want to underestimate the work of the theatre, nor do I wish to inflate it. Again, I agree with Rancière:

To dismiss the fantasies of the word made flesh and the spectator rendered active, to know that words are merely words and spectacles merely spectacles, can help us arrive at a better understanding of how words and images, stories and performances, can change something of the world we live in.

**Theorists of Autobiography**

In the process of writing my script, I have also been functioning as a reader of autobiography, and this clarifies for me the claims I make about my experience of Walter Benjamin becoming a part of my own autobiography. Much autobiography is focused on the understanding of self in narrative form, and conventional narrative arcs, often heroic even in victimhood, make for tedious reading. Autobiographies are made

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70 ibid., p. 23.
up of many experiences and stories, and the casting of a life into a singular narrative minimises this complexity. Theorists of autobiography such as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Paul John Eakin, and Philippe Lejeune take issue with such linear, coherent approaches to autobiography, referring to the myths of unified identity:

We are always fragmented in time, taking a particular or provisional perspective on the moving target of our pasts, addressing multiple and disparate audiences. Perhaps, then, it is more helpful to approach autobiographical telling as a performative act.\(^\text{71}\)

Autobiography is performative in the sense that it creates a future as much as it reconstructs a past. Paul John Eakin writes:

It is always tempting to think that living a life would come before making a life story. That is why autobiography is often thought of as an art of retrospect. But making autobiography turns out to be a part of the fabric of our experience as we live it, as I mean to show … in my investigation of autobiography’s adaptive value. Insofar as this making involves a trying on of stories and their attendant identities, it is an art of the future, and it is always an act of self-determination no matter what the circumstances.\(^\text{72}\)

Autobiographies are also performative in their formal construction. Lejeune writes:

To different degrees, autobiographies comment on their own genesis: authors may stage their project’s origin, keep some sort of writing journal or chronicle, or comment on the techniques they employ or the difficulties they will face.\(^\text{73}\)

Lejeune’s more recently translated writings on \textit{diary}, and earlier work by Felicity Nussbaum, for example, have raised important questions of intent, immediacy, confession and concealment, expected readership, and the presentation and performance

\(^{71}\) S Smith and J Watson., op. cit., p.61.


\begin{quote}
It does not operate \textit{in} time at all, for time is liquidated. Instead it is a book \textit{of} time: daybook, book of days. This transmits the rays of his knowledge through space. In the diary there is no chain of experiences, for then it would be without interval. Instead time is overcome, and overcome, too, is the self that acts in time: I am entirely transposed into time; it irradiates me.\footnote{W Benjamin, 'The Metaphysics of Youth', (1913-1914), trans. R Livingstone, in \textit{Early Writings}, op. cit., p. 151.}
\end{quote}

Already I can see here intimations of Benjamin’s theories of history, self and writing. These particular qualities of diary and journal, potentially unfixed, in the moment, and with rhetorical forms both transparent and obscure, can be best explored in the theatre, if an appropriate dramaturgy is developed, as performance is both real in time and space and representational, and therefore unfixed. These diaristic qualities are apparent in theatrical performance, where referential truth claims interact in a real and imaginary temporal relationship with the autobiographical awareness of spectators. When theatre practitioners offer explanations of their autobiographical work, as I do in this project, their commentary adds to the referentiality of it, destabilising any fixed notions of self even further.

The actor is present autobiographically in performance, working in a body marked by a life history of physical and imaginative experience. In character-based performance styles this autobiography is concealed or at odds with the biography or fiction presented, hence the problems of both type-casting and miscasting, unless it is also the autobiography of the actor. Even then it is always a play in various senses of the word, as the actor moves between different presentations of a multiplicitous self, as I do explicitly in this project. Sometimes performance of autobiography is taken to mean actors performing others' autobiographies, but these are conversions of written autobiography into performed biography, no longer expressed by the subject of the autobiography. There is a rich contemporary range of properly autobiographical performance in theatre, comedy and dance, especially in solo performance. It is not
possible in the scope of this exegesis to present an overview of such work, or an analysis of it, as my concerns are with a particular dramaturgy of fragmentary subjectivity, but many autobiographical performers critique and present personal creative experience in a reflective process that asks important questions of practice in relation to personal, professional, social, and political commitments.\textsuperscript{76}

Spalding Gray’s \textit{auto-performances} are worth discussion here however, central as they are to an understanding of the history and potential influence of performed autobiography, in English language performance scholarship at least. It is interesting that his text-based autobiographical work tends to be categorised with performance art.\textsuperscript{77} This suggests that his work is embodied physically and unrepeatably in the present, in the mode of performance art, but it ignores the detailed and long-term theatrical shaping of his work as an improvisation-text-performance process, and his theatrical background as an actor in the Wooster Group:

He constructed his monologues by telling and retelling his stories, and he revised them in public, from performance to performance. Stories would be added and dropped, shortened and lengthened, rearranged, emphasized and de-emphasized as, like most artists, he discovered what he was trying to do only in the process of trying to do it.\textsuperscript{78}

Spalding Gray is exemplary of many of the issues raised in autobiographical theatre, in part because he seems an exception to the activist norm of this performance genre, as used to assert marginalized identities. Critics construct a sort of apologia around him. Aviva Kempner writes:

\begin{quote}
Spalding – the most neurotic WASP I ever had the pleasure of knowing, a Wasp Jew – was the most entertaining friend I had. No conversation was without great
\end{quote}


storytelling and wit. He loved telling the story of arriving on the set with Sharon Stone and her declaring, ‘Another intellectual has arrived.’

Auslander writes of Gray’s work as 'autopathographic monologues', implying some sort of pathology. He also uses him as a prime example of ‘televisual’ live performance. Heddon lists autobiographical performers, concluding with Gray, and states:

Gray, as the white, straight male here proves to be the exception . . . Whilst Gray may have fulfilled most of the criteria for the dominant and dominating normative subject, arguably his experience of mental health equally marginalized him from normative society.

My experiences of childhood, family, relatives, friends and colleagues have given me an extensive experience of behaviours and psychologies that are often thought of as individual problems in order to deny the social implications. Individuals are defined as difficult people, and families struggle to cope. Normative society polices non-existent norms of existence, and Spalding Gray revels in the absurdity of this and turns it into art. What makes Spalding Gray remarkable is not the autobiography of an idiosyncratic or mentally ill human being, but the artistry and intensity of his autobiographical performances. The positionings of Spalding Gray as a performance artist, and as a marginalized performer, are a misrecognition of the dynamics at work in autobiographical performance, which is individual as well as social expression, and artful as well as autobiographical narrative. Gray himself understands the confusions that emerge between presence and representation, individual and group. He doesn’t present himself as mentally ill, or as a representative of a particular category, but as a creative individual grappling with the incomprehensible absurdities and accidents of life. Others, however, attempt to reduce him to type. He writes in the preface to the published playscript of the monologue Monster in a Box that after a performance:

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81 D Heddon, op. cit., pp. 2 and 173 n.2.
I got a phone call from a representative of the National Foundation for Mental Health. And she said, ‘Mr Gray, we saw your show in Washington and we were knocked out by it. What we’d like to propose, and don’t get me wrong on this, is that you become our national spokesman. I hope you don’t think this is out of line with what you’re doing, but we feel that we’ve never heard anyone so articulate about their mental illness.’

He lets this stand without comment, letting his work make the ironies and absurdities clear. In this playscript he describes the ‘monster’ at the centre of Monster in a Box, a book nineteen hundred pages long titled Impossible Vacation:

The book was just going to be about me, that New England puritan, who happens to find it very difficult to take pleasure when in very pleasurable places … The monologue I’m going to perform is about something else. The monologue is about all the interruptions that happened to me while I was trying to write the book. In fact, I’d have to say the monologue you’re going to hear tonight is a monologue about a man who can’t write a book about a man who can’t take a vacation.

This reflexive focus in art is traceable back beyond Sterne or Cervantes, but there is something unusual in Gray’s theatrical performances of it. Gray’s texts read as ongoing dramas of his own life; his performances are experienced as theatrical drama. Autobiography takes on in his work an obvious performative aspect.

Spalding found in life, as so many artists do, what he was looking for – what he needed – for his work. It wasn’t anything half so simple as life imitating art. It was far more mysterious, something more like art guiding life, making things happen according to the needs of art.

In my research it has become clear that this process is not mysterious. Walter Benjamin and Spalding Gray found that the arts of writing and performance were a necessary part

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83 ibid., pp. 3 and 5.
of creating meaning out of and in their lives, as do I. The dramatic or even melodramatic nature of this claim seems appropriate to theatrical autobiography, and it is arguably appropriate to autobiography generally. In 1992 Evelyn Hinz proposed a strong affinity between Aristotelian drama and biography and autobiography in ‘Mimesis: the Dramatic Lineage of Auto/Biography’, an essay that argues for a generic relationship between the mimetic and dramatic principles of Aristotle’s Poetics and autobiography, rather than the more usual parallels drawn between autobiography and the novel:

For despite their disparateness and variety, auto/biographical documents do have three basic features in common [with drama]: an element of conflict and dialogue, a sense of performance and/or spectatorship, and a mimetic or referential quality … possibly what has impeded the formulation of a ‘poetics’ of auto/biography may be the failure to recognize its dramatic affinities and the tendency to liken it instead to prose fiction.

Hinz counterposes drama based on action to novelistic narrative and description, while recognizing the simplifications involved. She suggests autobiography tends to the pictorial, the vivid, the emotional, and the agony of self-dramatization that concerns James Olney in his Metaphors of Self; she notes the theatrical metaphors used by Eakin and others; and in speech act studies, such as Elizabeth Bruss’s Autobiographical Acts, she identifies ‘a discontent with narrative analogies and an implicit shift in the direction of drama’. The similarity between auto/biography and Aristotelian drama is:

… their factual, referential quality, or premise that something empirically real is being imitated, something that has an existence outside of or prior to the text. Thus, while theoretically all art has experience in the ‘real’ world as its point of departure, in drama and auto/biography the imitation of ‘real’ life or the notion that something ‘real’ is being imitated is a sine qua non.

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85. EJ Hinz, ‘Mimesis: The Dramatic Lineage of Auto/Biography’, 1992, in M Kadar, Essays On Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice, University of Toronto Press, 1992. She refers to autobiography and biography as auto/biography throughout this essay; for my purposes autobiography is sufficient, as her arguments are applied equally to both.
86. ibid., p. 195.
87. ibid., p. 198
88. ibid., p. 199.
In autobiography and drama, she continues, prefiguring Lejeune’s judgement of the referential:

Aesthetic pleasure in fiction depends upon a sense of the autonomy of the art object, whereas in drama and life writing what we delight in is a sense that the subject can never be pinned down, that what we are witnessing is a performance, and that what is being imitated can never be fully expropriated or superseded by the copy.\textsuperscript{89}

What interests me here is not the accuracy of her interpretations of Aristotle, and the narrowness of her definition of drama arising from his definitions, but the ideas raised:

The importance of a dramatic analogy is that it enables one to recognize the historical/referential component of auto/biography while still arguing for its artistry, whereas the use of a novelistic model leads to the nihilistic cul-de-sac of denying the reality and the humanity of the individual and of arguing that existence itself is ‘ultimately fiction’.\textsuperscript{90}

I have quoted Hinz’s article in detail because I find her argument innovative, clearly articulated, and useful in its implications. Autobiography works with referential truth claims anchored in individual histories, even while resembling or using the narrative structures of the fictional novel. Theatrical performance also does this, in a different way: the actor’s body and voice are referentially present, and, in autobiographical performance, representation can point directly to this, while playing with the reality that an audience cannot reliably know this person, even and especially in the person’s presence. It is an approach that allows for the creativity of a self that can never be contained by or fully expressed in any autobiography. In my work, the play of representation and self deliberately shows the incompleteness of the attempt, and, in my case, how important it is that this incompleteness be possible. \textit{Evasion} may be the defining figure of my work, the limit of my willing self-revelation, or admitted self-knowledge.

\textsuperscript{89} ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} ibid. She gives the example of Petrie, Dennis, \textit{Ultimately Fiction: Design in Modern American Literary Biography}, Purdue University Press, 1981.
A dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments and the idea of performative autobiography imply the fragmentary performer: that is, someone able to flexibly apply a range of skills and experience to the work of autobiographical creation. Autobiographical performance can provide a starting point for developing such skills, with educational implications. Katrina M. Powell discusses teaching a course that explores ideas of performativity in the writing of autobiography, and writes of the pedagogical value of this. It requires students to perform texts they study and write their own autobiographical pieces, which can also be performed. Julia Swindells too refers to performance uses of autobiography for social or educational reasons:

… performance and theatre, and by extension, any educational experience of a group, can generate a collective use of autobiography, which can also form the grounds for group coherence, for exploring and defining group experience in new ways.

In the context of online communication and the widespread use of social media and its effects on educational environments, I am particularly drawn to the argument of Jennifer Wise that Greek tragedy started with the growth of literacy, and that ever since, western theatre’s function has been to test and challenge the communication technologies of its times. Theatre might still fulfill this function, and although I cannot explore this further here, the educational uses of performed autobiography, especially in today’s world of online social media narratives, are potentially an example of this.

Finding one’s own ways of performing according to the personal combination of skills one possesses is a crucial part of a performative process, and the formal and technical choices made are a necessary part of the agency implicit in a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments. This dramaturgy can be applied to objects, narratives, technical skills, or modes of representation. Each work will generate its own unique combination of dramaturgical choices. My choices in this project have been in favour of older artefacts and styles, reflecting my lifelong interests and my own collections,

another reason that I work with Benjamin. I focus on actor process in live performance because this is where my personal expertise lies. The paradox of presentation and representation with a live audience allows performers and audiences to engage with the ambiguities of time and space. It contributes to autobiographical research by exploring the complex realities present in the subjectivities of body, voice, and imagination. As an actor I can never experience my presence and my live performance as an audience does; I can only do that in mediated form, and, as any actor knows, seeing the recording of a live performance bears little relation to the original experience, for actors or audience, regardless of how they, or the market, value that distinction.

Deidre Heddon wrote *Autobiography and Performance* in 2008 because she sensed that ‘a consolidated overview of autobiographical performance practice, and the various concerns engaged and raised by it, is missing.’ She gives a wide-ranging account of ‘key concerns implicated in performances that take personal material as their primary source.’ In her introduction she states:

… located within and arising out of the second-wave feminist movement, autobiographical performance was regarded by women as a means to reveal otherwise invisible lives, to resist marginalization and objectification and to become, instead, speaking subjects with self-agency; performance, then, as a way to bring into being a self. Autobiographical performances provide a way to talk out, talk back, talk otherwise.

She gives an account of scripts and theoretical writings, noting ‘it is really from the late 1990s onwards that there has been a coherent critical engagement with autobiographical performance as a complex genre.’ Heddon raises doubts, however, about the politics of autobiographical theatre performance in the context of today’s mass-mediatised, confessional, world. She concludes that autobiographical performance:

… may variously be an act of invention, intervention, contestation, revelation …

might bring hidden denied or marginalized experiences into the spotlight,
proposing other possible life paths … might serve to make more complex our historical knowledge … might enable us to imagine different selves … might enable new insights into the relationship between experience and structures of power, between identity and its formation … might allow a connection between the performer and the spectator … might well be a space of learning [my italics].

‘The word “might”, however, needs to be confronted’, she writes, as she lists some associated dangers: the essentialising gestures, limiting identities, normative narratives, and avoidance of structural inequalities. The risk of potential failures and failed potential, she says, ‘is lessened by an informed and thoughtfully critical – self-conscious – practice.’

She notes, however, the appropriation of the autobiographical monologue from an earlier feminist praxis by a cheap mode of actor self-promotion, or personal confession without political context:

This cultural omnipresence of autobiography begs the question whether a resistant autobiographical practice is even any longer a possibility … The radical feminist act was not only the publicizing of the personal but also the insistence that the personal was never only personal since it was always structural and relational … the politics of the personal is that the personal is not singularly about me.

My work attempts to intensify the power of a politics of the personal, with its social implications, by stressing the importance of the freedom of formal choices in autobiographical performance (and here I absolutely agree with Brecht on the necessarily flexible relationship of form and content where he argues that realism does not require prescribed or circumscribed forms). I mentioned earlier that the unmet challenge of our times is the effective articulation of individual experience with broader social action for change. My initial exploration of political theatre turned into this detailed study of the autobiographical as I explored the usefulness of my individual

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97 ibid., p. 157.
98 ibid., p. 158.
99 ibid., p. 161.
experience for that project of social change. A coherent identity expressing my individuality does not make sense to me, personally or politically. I believe the performative aspect of self is now one of agency expressed individually, not agency asserted through identity. This autobiographical performance research asserts that I am axiomatically equal in general, and potentially an agent of transformation. I can change my world.

I have explored a range of Walter Benjamin’s writings to explicate his importance for understanding the performative nature of autobiography, and to highlight the affinities of his views of history, time, and revolutionary action with the immediate now-time of theatrical performance. I have related this performativity to individual agency and Jacques Rancière’s views on axiomatic equality. I have discussed theorists of the autobiographical, in literature and in performance, in order to draw out the performative aspects of autobiographical work. Evelyn Hinz’s highly suggestive proposal that autobiography be compared with drama rather than with the novel is historically significant and deserves more recognition. I have focused on the importance of Spalding Gray as a practitioner and exponent of autobiographical work in performance, and I have noted Deirdre Heddon’s apprehensions about the activist project of the autobiographical monodrama. As Philippe Lejeune says:

‘Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject – it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing.’¹⁰¹

In the theatre, no matter how fictional the construct I am presenting, I am also present as *I the actor*; my body presents and represents me, autobiographically inseparable. If I am also the author, in live theatre the autobiographical resonances and complexities increase.

Chapter 2: Script and Performance

This chapter is about my creative process, which incorporates traditional scholarly research, and a series of dramaturgical practices that have led me to a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments, inspired by Walter Benjamin, and realized through fragmented text, nonlinear narrative, Brechtian-inflected performance style, my particular acting and singing skills, and a mise-en-scene dominated by autobiographically significant objects. I suggest that the play of actor and character in the autobiographical framework allows for imaginative identifications and formal experiments that destabilise assumptions about identity, allowing for an agency in the performer that shapes, conceals and reveals in creative ways. Walter Benjamin models such a complex performativity in his writings, and in making my performance I discovered that my ability as a performance maker to choose the content, and the forms, of exploration are both artistically and psychologically important to me (in writing, and in the deployment of a range of my particular skills). As one of these choices I use *evasion* as a creative principle to explore other lives and narratives, with a conscious construction of hints, parallels and affinities shedding light on aspects of myself. The resulting knowledge is not limited by the passive performativity of confessional forms, or the constraints of heroic narratives, but is expressed through the creative shaping of personal experience into representational, performed autobiography.
**Writing**

This project is grounded in my writing. I shape what I think I have read into the foreshadowings of argument, I track ideas across generic boundaries, and I move towards a larger project of writing and performance, made possible by the ongoing freedom of my journal. The journal does not have to achieve anything beyond its moment, in fragments, stream-of-consciousness prose, and especially in the writing of poetry, where connotative rather than denotative attempts to write down thought and feeling allow me great imaginative freedom.

My research journal consists of 51 exercise books, each typically of 32 recto leaves in a 64 page exercise book, handwritten. It contains accounts of my reading, dreams, poems, conferences, outlines for papers, and ideas for performance, and at its heart it recounts my struggle with the whole process of research and performance, the tangents, evasions, and the feelings engendered, often of despair. I’ve read and heard people say: ‘Oh yes, you have to throw the PhD journal out, you’ll never look at that again’; but in this research it is central to my creative method and to the documentation of it. It contains the poems, ideas, monologues, rants and scenes that I intended or later discovered to be the origin of many parts of the script and the performance. At key stages I read through the journal numbering fragments and sequences as potential scenes for the script: an inner thought process, an idea or a memory, a poem. Returning to the journal I can follow the contradictory flow of my thought. It is a profoundly autobiographical artefact. It allows me to revisit the evasions and tangents, and ponder them. It models a montage derived from the work of the collector and archivist, in form and content. It determines the final form of the script, in its range of styles and its discontinuous flow. It is a primary document in a generative sense, lacks any editorial artifice, and in itself would make for difficult reading, but it sits at the centre of the work. It is also my record and documentation, allowing access to a creative process that is largely hidden in final performance. It is my tangible method, providing, in its seemingly chaotic form, a textual and chronological coherence to the downs and ups of my work process.

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102 I use the journal, volume 35, in the performance, for the description of the obsessive breakfast routine. See Annotated Script, Appendix.
Walter Benjamin inflects his work in performative ways through styles of writing as experimental as Brecht’s in the theatre, using ideas deriving from theology, mysticism, language art criticism, Marxism, graphology – in short, from a deliberately contradictory plethora of disciplines related to his theories of time, history and politics. I present the autobiographical in my own varied ways through my presence as the embodied, autobiographical performer. I develop a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments derived from Benjamin’s use of the concepts of aura, constellation, history and time.

Early in the project I started to articulate an understanding of my work being possible because I possess the intuitive skills that derive from long-term embodied experience as a professional actor; this too is autobiographical. In my performance work I have attempted to show aspects of my ways of existing, without focusing on explanations that would inevitably be false or misleading. Theatrical exploration and performance can do this effectively because it can embody experience, rather than explaining it. Theatre works in the present with repetition, but never repeats itself. It suits the performativity at the heart of Benjamin’s work, opening up new social possibilities in the present through the agency of individual expression. I explore this by engaging my body, mind and emotions with Benjamin’s ideas, bringing together autobiography, theatrical performance and the fragments of Benjamin’s life and work. Autobiography and theatre both create possibilities for transformation, and the creation of new meaning.

I used many styles in my play, the dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments applying to the shifts of dramaturgy itself, drawing on ideas of epic theatre from both Brecht and Benjamin, on realistic, absurdist, reflexive, or naturalistic conventions, and on explorations of Benjamin’s ideas of fragmentary moments and possibilities grasped in now-time. Most scenes were played directly to the audience. Contradiction, juxtaposition and relationships between presences, themes, objects and dramaturgical elements played out through the length of the performance as well as within various fragments. I give a brief summary of the performance narrative below, as a reminder of

the shifts in performance modes. It is in part a Brecht-inspired dramaturgy, episodic, shifting, and contradictory, because my experience of life matches these episodic forms; and it is a dramaturgy inspired by Benjamin’s experimental writing. It is also a dramaturgy of performativity that reshapes my present in its recognitions of the processes I use, even though I often find them obscure, or wish to deny them.


In that synopsis of a performance narrative lie thousands of shifts of thought, position, body, voice and self, all overlapping in a distillation of more than three years of moving from ideas of political theatre to those of autobiography and fragmented theatrical performance. The play presents and represents the work of the research, and arises from and is described by writing as inspirational cause and documentary result.

I have been exploring myself through this work at many levels: as writer, performer, researcher, and as David Adamson, with all the family history, personal angst, and imagination that these different selves entail. They are bound together by the performative acts of self-definition involved that restate the past in order to create a different set of possibilities in the present. Performativity links my autobiography with that of Benjamin’s by way of a concept of agency that invokes personal and political change. This link exists through Brecht, in theatre and in politics. I first read Brecht On Theatre in 1976, bought from a left-wing bookstall, and was especially interested in the attempts Brecht made to theorise a new theatrical practice in a document modeled on the historical form of Bacon’s Novum Organum: Brecht’s ‘A Short Organum for the Theatre’ 105. However, the relationship of Brecht’s cultural politics to the 1970s, or to the 21st century, is hard to define in terms of theory, or method. Fredric Jameson suggests:

But it is important to remember that the Brechtian doctrine of activity – if it was once energizing because activity and praxis were very precisely on the agenda – is now urgent and topical precisely because they are not, and because so many people seem immobilized in the institutions and the professionalization which seem to admit of no revolutionary change, not even of the evolutionary or reform-oriented kind. 106

104 This is a simple summary of a range of actor presentations and representations that I recall on reading through the script. See Annotated Script, Appendix, and the DVD of the performance.
106 F Jameson, Brecht and Method, op. cit., p. 4.
That I attempt to find agency through Benjamin more than Brecht has to do with the appeal of Benjamin’s autobiographical writings, his incompleteness, and his resistance to orthodox categorisations. My outlook, personally and politically, is more pessimistic than otherwise; Benjamin’s struggles are ones I identify with, and I relate to his attempts to retain a hold on his sanity through art, not politics, without despairing entirely of the potential for revolutionary change.

**Evasion**

The dramaturgy derives from both Brecht and Benjamin, however. What they share, expressed in their collaborative friendship, is a wide-ranging gathering of ideas in the service of projects of revolutionary cultural and political intent. Brecht is interested in the clear presentation of contradictions in defined contexts; Benjamin is more concerned with acknowledging contradictions within and between ideas and belief systems, and prefers suggestions to conclusions. As he says above in the letter to Gretel Adorno, he suspects that ‘the problem of remembering (and of forgetting)... will continue to occupy me for a long time.’\(^{107}\) He is concerned with the intricacies of language and story-telling from a literary and philosophical point of view, and develops his own intricate accounts of research, history and time, as I show above. His cultural interests grow out of the rich soil of his cultural and historical background, as Scholem and Steiner discuss. His personal life is inflected with depression and disappointment, as his biography shows. He theorising is selective and eclectic, and so are the interpretations of his work, as I have mentioned. He focuses on details, and yet his inner life remains largely inaccessible to conventional narration. He, like Brecht, is evasive, although for his own reasons: the style feels very different. Benjamin seems sad and somewhat innocent; Brecht feels brash and, in his own words, cunning or sly.\(^{108}\) I do not have Brecht’s confidence, and I find much of his writing emphatic and overt in its contradictions.

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\(^{107}\) W Benjamin and G Adorno, op. cit., p. 286.

In response to Benjamin’s contradictions, which seem far more personal and elusive, I use performance to express personal experience indirectly. I don’t attempt conclusions; I’m busy trying to frame the questions. I think in fragments, and I avoid linear representations of my own experience. My own history, and hopes for the future, are elusive: causal explanations and their truths are the stuff of nightmares. Benjamin’s work gives life to fragmentary experiences; not merely a dramatic foil, he contributes to a dramaturgy suitable for the fragment, the object, the collector and the uncontrollable excesses of the stuff of life, thought and research. Using Walter Benjamin enables me to shape a dramaturgical method for representing and presenting memory and autobiography, trauma and silence. His work at the same time suggests a dramaturgical template for exploring biography in a performative mode. Autobiography in performance can draw on a wide range of expressive forms and narrative structures, according to the skills and passions of the performer. Performing autobiography can address other biographies in performative ways, bringing other lives into the present through their existences in my own life.

Performance embodies, presents, and represents the self, despite all evasions. However, my use of the word evasion is contradictory: from its Latin origin meaning to exit, or go out; to the act or means of escaping from danger; to avoiding a danger by artifice or contrivance; to evading a duty or charge; to prevarication, an evasive argument, a shuffling excuse, dodging, and subterfuge. However, I haven’t been using it with any of these meanings, exactly: my meaning of evasion is to avoid defining myself, and I’m acutely aware that it often isn’t conscious. It seems like all the above definitions are relevant, because danger comes into play, and so does specious argument, but mine is more a popular understanding from psychology than any of the dictionary definitions. When I claim it as the defining figure of my work, I’m proposing this rather than affirming an existing technique, although it may well exist; and my approach to an understanding of it has itself been evasive. A part of me really does not wish to be seen, or to have an effect on an audience, and some other actors I’ve spoken to in the past say that they too are aware of this contradiction.

I wrote this earlier, before consulting the dictionary:

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Evasions can be expressed as evasions, not exposed by abusive revelations, and they can therefore be accepted. They can reveal contours of experience and thought, tracing the shape of the heaps of rubbish Walter Benjamin sees mounting up, without overwhelming us with the endless details of stupidity, suffering and atrocity.

It is interesting that here I write of evasion as a counter to endless detail; therefore it clearly serves a limiting or boundary-making function, and perhaps can be teased out as that which gives the outer shape to any autobiography. If autobiography is a performative expression of self then the autobiographer clearly sets the limits: ‘I will not go further, I will not consciously express knowledge or thought beyond my willingness to do so.’ I express the writing of Benjamin, or Brecht, or Bartlett or Rodric Adamson or myself through moments and sequences of embodied performance, where words are only one aspect of expression, and where the actor and audience can share silence in ways blank spaces or pages do not, by using the techniques and elements of body language, intonation, facial expression, and collective interaction in shared time and space. It is in these experiential dimensions that further contradictory truths may
reveal themselves, visible through the evasions and misdirections in which they are wrapped or veiled.

Given my ambivalences, it is difficult to portray my life and my experiences directly. I need to evade the implications of presenting myself, and I do this by presenting various states of being, while providing little narrative or biographical information. In performance, a persona of ‘David’ gives hints but avoids revelation: ‘I don’t like being looked at!’ which is obviously contradictory; and ‘I don’t want to have an effect on the audience!’ which is bizarre.\(^{110}\) I (and I mean I) slip sideways into the work, using the biographical information of Benjamin or Bartlett, expressing myself through fragments, or song, leaving a trail of clues that I don’t really want anyone to interpret. I encourage you, the audience and the reader, to dive into your own autobiographies, and pretend I don’t want you to see mine. Certainties of character and self in the theatre are destabilised, and I present personal truths ironically. These contradictions of interaction and expression are not unusual in those who have experienced trauma, abuse or depression, and I seek to represent them theatrically. What have I experienced? I can’t tell you directly, but I tell you more than I realise. I am not deliberately misleading you

\(^{110}\) See Annotated Script.
for theatrical, literary, narrative or dramatic effect. Autobiographical performance, as I experience it, is a serious game.

Performing

The development of the performance followed a pattern of gathering and selecting fragments, ideas and styles. It cannot be separated from the writing process, which itself developed through various experiments in presentation. The first presentation was to my three academic supervisors, in December 2009, and ranged from theatrical image-making, songs, and poems to texts of Shakespeare, early Anglo-Saxon poetry, Brecht and Benjamin, and although none of these met my requirements for the autobiographical approach of the final play, they helped me find my way there, especially the Archbishop of Canterbury’s tedious justification of war with France in Henry V, Act I; The Ruin, in Anglo-Saxon, incomplete, which prefigures Benjaminian themes of history and decay; and Brecht and Benjamin arguing, recorded in the fascinating minutes of a Krise und Kritik meeting held in 1931.111 In form this presentation used fragments, shifts of presence, show-and-tell objects, and an underlying critique of the techniques of performance. It also presented the coat, and the first discussion of physical metaphor.

The second presentation, to two supervisors in December 2010, was an inconclusive laying out in a studio space of some 360 fragments, quotes and performance ideas, written on filing cards. A discussion developed, with Ron Goodrich and Ann McCulloch, concerning the personal relevance of particular theories or philosophers, and it touched on a Deleuzean becoming and the methodology associated with the rhizome, Nietzschean contradictions and Wittgenstein. I reasserted my research choice of Walter Benjamin’s mode of the tangent, the montage, and the performative, and suggested this was a valid methodological process. Conference presentations in this earlier period also found me attempting to challenge the form of academic presentations in the act of presenting them, sometimes usefully. I rolled and swam on tables, sang

songs, and read diary entries verbatim. I presented random fragments, I represented presentations, and I critiqued critiques.112

The third presentation was a vital link between the earlier and the later work. Presented on two nights at La Mama Theatre, in late March 2011,113 to an invited audience of theatre colleagues and friends, it consisted of many fragments and forms, and was dramaturgically under-developed. All the scenes and fragments were read from cards; there was little shaping of the flow of the scenes or the shape of the whole piece. The experience clarified some of the important dramaturgical elements leading to a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments: montage, varied acting and performance registers, a critique of standard theatrical elements and their effects, the coherence engendered by the performer/creator/writer in live performance, and the role of the audience in creating narrative. Some people responded enthusiastically to it on its own terms. Its importance for the research, however, was the recognition of key issues: the form of montage, the critique of conventions from within themselves, the personal implications of the focus on the depressive Walter Benjamin, and the persistence of my

112 At various conferences, hosted by Double Dialogues, Narrative Australia, Deakin HDR Summer Schools, ADSA and others.
113 No title as such; a work-in-progress showing.
evasions at every level, from the dismissal of difficult personal issues, and the abrupt shifts of content, to the distrust I felt for the effects of theatrical techniques.

These issues became clearer during the following months, during extensive discussions, especially with Glenn D’Cruz, my principal supervisor, as I attempted to find a performance direction, and resisted an emphasis on theatrical or narrative revelation. In June and July, 2011 I began writing and shaping scenes with a dramaturgical intent, emphasising fragments and discontinuities in contention with themes and flow. I wrote 111 scenes in six weeks, continually using the journal as source and reflection. I then began the process of selection and rejection, developing a dramaturgy appropriate to the use of fragments, layering, and non-linearity, as I entered into a complicated process of rehearsal and development. I spent weeks in the studio seeking appropriate ways to perform. I rolled around the space pondering and exploring ways to embody the various texts, how to represent characters, and how to inhabit my body and voice as performer. I spent some time working with friends: 9 hours over one week with actor/director Alex Pinder; later, 24 hours over two weeks with actor/director Susie Edmonds, who helped me shape and generate a 50 minute sequence. This help was crucial to my shifting from a written to a performance mode, and in making dramaturgical sense of a sequence of scenes. I then presented the 50-minute performance in November, 2011, the first rehearsed and developed theatrical form of the project. I brought personally significant objects into the space (the coat, my grandfather’s chest), and other objects appeared out of them. The script seemed close to a finished form at that time, but proved to be the early development of an appropriate dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments.

The major addition of content following this presentation was related to my communist poet grandfather Bartlett Adamson, who had not appeared at all in the 50-minute performance. This material belongs to the same historical period as Benjamin and Brecht, with similar cultural and political themes emerging in the very different Australian context. Its importance to me lies in its hints about my father, who had appeared in the 50 minute version, and his silences concerning childhood, sexuality and communist politics. In my grandfather’s case, the politics of race and gender emerge in contradictory ways: racism in his boys’ adventure story, but advocacy of Asian self-determination and Aboriginal rights; sexist objectification of women, and a spurious
promotion of sexually explicit literature. His communist politics link me through time to Benjamin and Brecht.

I was acquiring more objects relevant to the work, and this was shaping the dramaturgy and design as I added them to the rehearsal process. A week before opening at La Mama Theatre, my principal supervisor commented that objects needed to accumulate as chaos after they were revealed, rather than being put aside or away, to physically express the overwhelming aspects of collecting and hoarding. He also suggested more music, and so I selected an eclectic range of my favourite music appropriate to scenes in the play. Amidst the many demands of organisation, getting audiences, transporting innumerable objects and planning technical aspects of the show, I felt increasingly confused: I was directing myself performing in my own writing, and struggling to find a stable point from which to view this complex process. This was a key experience: the obstacle and challenge of shifting positions within and without the play, experienced as a fragmentation of self, contributed to the developing dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments.

See Bibliography, and the Annotated Script for titles and examples of Bartlett Adamson’s writings.
The La Mama season itself expressed the autobiographical in a number of ways. Firstly, I had wanted to do the season there because I love the space, its shape, qualities, and history, and had known it since 1990. Secondly, I planned an event after each of the five performances to encourage people to stay and chat: themed sessions of 78 recordings played on wind-up gramophones. Thirdly, I had planned the La Mama season two years earlier so that the final Sunday performance would take place on my birthday, 56 years after I was born on another Sunday in 1956. It was a belated celebration. I didn’t mark my 50th birthday in any special way (‘Why?’ I demanded of my brother at the time, a bit hysterically, ‘What have I achieved? Nothing!!’). This performance season was the performatively act of marking my life and work, regardless of my reservations about it.

With the La Mama season completed I worked on a final script, drawing on that experience of performance and audience response. Some scenes didn’t suit performance, in the sense that I could not find ways to make them work on their own terms, or fit them into the rhythms of the montage. Scenes and moments grew out of family items, and other acquired objects brought into the rehearsal space began to make their presences felt.

The reshaped and finalised play was presented in five performances at Deakin University, Burwood Campus, June 20-22, 2012, in Studio Theatre P1.28; the examination performance was at 2pm on the final day. The final performance took place that evening, and although none of the scenes were improvised in performance, during it I did accidentally smash the antique bottle holding the rose. For the season I prepared Benjamin, Brecht, and Bartlett Adamson materials for the foyer: in particular, an old and damaged multi-page photocopy of Georg Steiner’s Benjamin article, which I had highlighted in many colours and stuck on my study wall in 2009, put up at the La Mama performances in February 2012, and rescued, rain-wet, from the garbage bin after the last performance there. It is highly fitting that this photocopy of the published account of a verbal address by Steiner at a conference on Walter Benjamin, focused on a conversation with Gershom Scholem, one of Benjamin’s closest lifelong friends and intellectual collaborators, should have ended up acquiring its own aura, and should have been rescued from a rubbish bin, particularly since this document, more than any other, provided inspiration to the whole process, and gave my play its name.

These performances are now done, leaving traces in the documentation of script, writing, exegesis, photographs and recording. I set myself the task of exploring my responses to biography, autobiography, theatrical performance, and their combination in my own artistic process. The potential for this work is that each fragment and scene combines elements of presence and representation in different ways expressive of content; objects and music both embody and counterpoint autobiographical exploration; and the sequence as a whole allows elements and selves to appear, disappear and return.

In the project the spiral of my journey is expressed in the many layers of exploration and presence; moments reappear in the Benjaminian now-time of performance, from my early experiences in Manila, to the dreamlike engagement with Benjamin’s own death, and on to the written reflections of a continuing journal, the annotated script, and this exegesis.
Chapter 3: A dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments

Photo 9. Stuff, chaos, fragments in physical form. (D Adamson, Deakin, June 2012)

This exegesis supplements the research work underpinning the creative development of my performance, *The Tragic Suicide Of Professor Walter Benjamin, The Well-Known Academic Psychologist*. In this final chapter I will elaborate my dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments with reference to Walter Benjamin’s concepts of aura and objects, and constellations as a narrative and aesthetic form; and I return to dramaturgical elements that recur through the work: the role of the audience in creating narrative, shifts of presence, show-and-tell objects, varied acting and performance registers, the coherence engendered by the performer/creator/writer in live performance, resisting the idea of theatrical or narrative revelation, and the importance to all these of non-linear narrative strategies. These concepts inspire my non-linear approach to space, time and subjectivity. More specifically, I focus on those relationships within and between space (objects, mise-en-scene, body, audience) and time (verbal text, movement, music, imagination, thought, feeling). These elements combine in an original dramaturgy that would not have been possible to articulate without using the modes of journal writing, theatrical exploration, and research, particular in relation to Benjamin, and I believe that Benjamin’s ideas could not have been explored fruitfully in this direction without the theatrical work. I discuss a small number of scenes that express key aspects of these elements (the video recording of the performance, attached as an appendix to this exegesis, acts as a further resource in the documentation of my
creative process). I begin by providing a discussion of theatrical dramaturgy or the arrangement of elements in live theatre with reference to the work of Eugenio Barba. This leads to Jacques Rancière’s presentation of the paradox of the spectator to which he counterposes the emancipated spectator. I show the importance of moving beyond the binary of actor and character by discussing the third term of self, articulated clearly by David George as person. These discussions are followed by the beginnings of a practical methodology for autobiographical monodrama, focused on the uses in my play of objects and physical metaphor, evasion, personae, and Walter Benjamin’s concept of the constellation.

**Dramaturgy and the stage**

Dramaturgy refers to the process of selecting and ordering performance elements in a theatrical work. Eugenio Barba notes that ‘the 'text' (the weave) of the performance can be defined as 'dramaturgy' – that is, drama-ergon — the 'work of the actions' in the performance. He goes on to state that:

> In a theatrical performance, actions (concerning the dramaturgy, that is) are not only what the actors do and say, but also what sounds, noises, lights, changes in space are used. At a superior level of organization, actions are the episodes of the story or the different facets of a situation, the arches of time between two accents of the performance, between two changes in the space — or even the evolution, according to a relative autonomy, of the musical score, the variations of the lights, the variations of rhythm and intensity which an actor develops following certain precise physical themes (ways of walking, of treating the scenic objects, of using make-up or costume). The objects used in the performance are also actions, transforming themselves, acquiring different meanings and different emotive colorations.\(^{116}\)

We can already see that we are dealing with a wide and complex range of creative possibilities. While some artists choose to create a unified and cohesive performance

text, others choose to work with contradictions and contrasts as their method to activate the spectator’s imagination. A dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments is open to the infinite possibilities of the creative work. That is, it will attempt to find the most appropriate form of aesthetic expression: digression, meandering, and tangential explorations of what Barba calls concatenation and simultaneity.

Barba describes concatenation as linearity, sequence of actions through time, strongly identified with previously existing scripts, mise-en-scene, linearity and sequence; and simultaneity as multiple actions in the moment, including objects. His description of objects as actions articulates their representational significance on the stage, and this is important to the dramaturgy explored in my research. In my work objects related to autobiography have an active historical presence, imbued as they are with the lives of their users, and this echoes Walter Benjamin’s writings about auratic presence.

**Paradox of the Spectator (and the role of the audience in creating narrative)**

Barba, however, confuses his concepts in relation to audiences, slipping from the group to the individual without realising, assuming audiences need to be led and confronted with difficulty in order to experience “experience”. Jacques Rancière, referring to Diderot’s *Paradoxe Sur le Comedien*, explains this confusion as a ‘paradox of the spectator… possibly more fundamental than the famous paradox of the actor.’ He states that ‘there is no theatre without a spectator’, but that being spectator is usually considered a bad thing to be:

First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance, in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.

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117 ibid., p. 77
Jacques Rancière’s ‘emancipated spectator’, on the other hand, is already bringing the active skills of thought, imagination, and judgement to the process, and, he argues, has no need to be challenged in this way in order to become an active part of the process of theatre.\textsuperscript{120} The Brechtian tactic of challenging the audience to become intellectually engaged with the performance event is unnecessary. Rancière, whose essay on theatre is an application of his extensive historical work on axiomatic equality, proposes instead:

> to revoke the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image.

Note, he is not reducing theatre to these other forms, but while recognising its distinctiveness, does not make special claims for the experiential persuasiveness of its particular forms of representation vis-à-vis other artforms. He continues:

> In sum, it proposes to conceive it as a new scene of equality where heterogeneous performances are translated into one another. For in all these performances what is involved is linking what one knows with what one does not know; being at once a performer deploying her skills and a spectator observing what these skills might produce in a new context among other spectators. Like researchers, artists construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in the terms of the new idiom that conveys a new intellectual adventure.

It is hard to think of a better definition of Walter Benjamin’s work as researcher in his academic attempts, and in his various forms of writing, or of the aims of my own project. Rancière concludes:

> The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It requires spectators who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make it their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., pp. 16-17.
I would argue that emancipated spectators already exist but are often stymied by the theatrical work on offer, which usually refuses to recognise this possibility. What is required is the recognition that the individuals in an audience exist in a paradox of individual and collective experience, and actively participate in the acts of interpretation and creation without the need to do so in the same specific ways as the performers they are observing. This is at the heart of my exploration of a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments, with its explorations of forms appropriate to the multiplicity of individual experiences evident in any theatre setting.

**The autobiographical performer (and the coherence of self/writer/performer)**

I argue that this dramaturgy demands highly personal acts of selection and combination as the essential components of an autobiographical performance and its reception. These acts of selection and ordering express the singular attitude of each individual towards any self-expressive creative work. Further, it is the performer’s unique combination of skill, experience, memory, and imagination that gives the autobiographical performance its power. The dramaturgy functions more as a repertoire of performance-making strategies than as a template.

I therefore propose a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments that includes the experiences of body and mind, experience and practice, learning and imagination. Autobiographical performativity gives us permission to present ourselves in our own terms, choosing our individually preferred modes of expression. Specific performance skills, theatrical form and thematic content express a self-definition based on an acceptance of our agency in the world. No matter how elusive one's sense of self may be, we live through choices that reflect our subjectivity. A dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments allows for an unlimited range from which we can choose to express these subjectivities.

What matters here is the recognition that autobiographical form is as important as autobiographical content, and that this becomes obvious in the theatrical performance of autobiographical monodrama, where the form is expressed through the particular body of the author. This means that each artist must find the most suitable form to express his
or her life story, in service of the autobiographical performativity theorised by various authors referred to in Chapter 1.

Intuition as an aspect of experience applies especially to the actor, in that strange balance of awareness and self-censorship, and develops over decades. The writer too develops skills that are inseparable from the particular individual. As stated in the first chapter, Walter Benjamin privileges autobiography as a way of understanding place, time, and history, through travel narratives, drug raves, childhood memoirs, journal writings, fragments, doodles, radio broadcasts, and collections of objects, all creating new constellations. His ways of understanding place, time, and history are characterised by a sustained engagement with personal experience. However, this does not mean that the encounter with the self is arbitrary. Rather, each personal experience will determine the most appropriate form of aesthetic or critical writing. Benjamin's ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ to The Origin of German Tragic Drama theorises that the mode and expression of research must match the specific content, and that the best way to do this is to digress, meander, return and re-think, wander, and show the process and progress of thought of the researcher. I have been doing this over a period of years with my reading, my writing, my script, performance, and exegesis, consciously recognising the validity of this method, which combines speculation with research, and rough shaping with intricate details, including in the final forms.

Human presence in autobiographical theatre is also made up of fragments and layers because the body itself is marked and shaped by an individual history that can be represented in a complex and iterating autobiographical form, a dance of time, space, and memory. This material history can be represented without effort; the work weaves together various forms of presence and representation. Selves play with characters, and skills constitute the actor. A powerful motivation in my project was a sense of frustration with typical discussions of a Brechtian methodology for actors that always led me to say that Brecht’s methodology was that of rehearsal, not training; and that in theatre in Australia today it is impossible to know the inner motives of any actor working in an ensemble to perform in a Brecht or Brechtian-style play. Where is the person behind the actor and what motivates them: aesthetics, self-expression,

121 W Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, op. cit., p. 29.
community, money, career, or applause? What politics or philosophy motivates them? We can be sure their motivations will not be the same as those of the director, or the ensemble, or the theatre company, even if the actor is in sympathy, and, in the past, even if the director was Brecht. This led me to wonder why the person of the actor did not seem to figure in other methodologies, even that of the activist Boal.

Why is the selfhood of the individual person who chooses to be an actor subsumed in the profession and deemed irrelevant? It is clear to me that it is relevant to every aspect, from casting to or against type, to the possession of particular skills. David George attempts to theorise some of the contradictions of the actor/character binary, proposing a triadic scheme of the performing self, criticising Goffman the sociologist and Grotowski and other theatre theorists. He distinguishes person, actor and role:

Whatever may be true of the theatre of everyday life, in the theatre itself we have not two terms but three: a Person (Gielgud), a Profession (Actor) and a Role or Character (Hamlet).\(^\text{122}\)

He also suggests Stanislavski had grasped this, at least in rehearsal:

But Stanislavski, for those who bother to read him, located this fusion of actor, character, and person in the rehearsal room not on the stage. Indeed, he cleared up much of the confusion of earlier theory by carefully separating the whole process into three distinct stages: preparation, rehearsal and performance.\(^\text{123}\)

The contradictory triadic presence still exists in performance. George argues that if personal experience does not connect sufficiently via the skills of the actor with the role then the performance will be an inadequate one, failing the demands of energy and presence. He writes that ‘the actor directs the relationship between the person and the role, and, simultaneously, evaluates it.’\(^\text{124}\) This recognition potentially makes the autobiographical subject visible. Where I differ with him and Stanislavski is with regard

\(^\text{123}\) ibid., p. 359.
\(^\text{124}\) ibid, p. 360.
to the representation of character as the endpoint of the actor’s work; the autobiographical aspects of my project work to split that unity too.

We know that in each of us each self shape-shifts to context, just as actors slip in and out of characters. My dramaturgy is predicated on the knowledge that selves are fluid, that lives are experienced on many planes, that present awareness drifts through many times and places, and that every self is a unique combination of experience, memory and imagination. We can explore this by combining many elements: the emotional effects of music, the expressive embodiment of ideas and stories in physicality, the contours of space shaped by objects, and the tensions of all these interacting with each other and with text.

Using a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments in performance

Photo 10. Unpacking my library. (F Hogan, La Mama, February 2012)

In my play, books that I tipped over my head represented an ambivalent relationship with the printed word. A pile of my research drafts destroyed the cabinet and the rhythm
of the play to that point. The broken 78 record became part of my story told to the audience. Boxes opened to reveal objects with stories to give them context, or other boxes within boxes, or the puzzle of nothing at all. Stuff appeared and wouldn’t go away as order piled into chaos and I demonstrated a self drowning in confusion. I was concealed and congealed within books and objects, remembering, forgetting, writing, directing, intuiting, and learning about myself from the people and characters around me. This method allowed the energies of objects to emerge, making use of stories from other lives. It opened up to various dramaturgies, theatrical experiences, and directorial hints from other people, and its non-linearity allowed it to open up to other scenes and and fragments.

I discuss the coat, coats, books, furniture, boxes, Japanese tansu, non-electrical mechanical devices, and 78 records and players in the context of the scenes, fragments, and mise-en-scène; I describe selves, personas, characters, evasions and limits, the pleasures of performing a tree, the layerings and effacements of presence in the final suicide scene in the context of acting and performing character, persona and selves; and I discuss the synthesis of elements into the whole performance through Benjamin’s concept of the constellation.

**Show-and-Tell, Objects and Physical Metaphors**

Physical metaphor has played an important role in this work, arising from the significance of objects imbued with personal meaning and memory. This is an old cultural form of expression arising from the interaction of human imagination with the work of shaping the material world. Agency means the shaping of ourselves as part of this world, and forms of childhood expression such as show-and-tell, or recovering stories by showing relevant objects to older people, including those with dementias, express this. This goes some way to explaining the difficulty of giving up possessions: memories can exist in objects and might seem or actually be irretrievable without them. In a theatrical dramaturgy such objects both exist as themselves and represent and symbolize other meanings, much as the actor does, and a particular logic of representation can emerge organically from objects as a principle of theatrical design, as it does in *The Tragic Suicide of Walter Benjamin, The Well Known Academic Psychologist*. As an actor I usually prefer minimalist performance environments, but the
logic of a theatrical work so concerned with Benjamin's relationships with books, small objects, ideas and constellations, and all their interactions, and with my similar practices, demanded an excess of things. This logic extended via a similar reflexive concern with the ambiguities of the hidden, the displayed, and the revelatory in such a way as to emphasize objects that expressed these.

Physical objects change through time and in shifts of context. The most interesting objects seem imbued with their own individual history, and they also represent more than themselves when put in the context of art. The dramaturgy of such objects can powerfully influence an emerging stage design that goes beyond the sheen of artistic set construction. Costume too can be developed in a similar way, found rather than invented, made, or reconstructed from paintings and photographs. Are the coats clothing or objects? Why are physical images and metaphors so important?

Photo 11. Coats shape and move the space. (D Adamson, Deakin, June 2012)

If aura is a useable concept in relation to live theatre and my performance, as I suggested earlier, it is the coat that most expresses it. The particular coat I used over two years as Walter Benjamin perhaps functioned for me as certain objects and stories did for him. An autobiographical element is in the foreground, as it is in the moment
when we see an original, famous work of art; we have an experience that we think is worth recounting. The stories one tells of such experiences bears witness to their uniquely personal qualities. I felt my connection with Walter Benjamin most strongly in the coat that I wore while performing his speeches. Significantly, this was not because it was historically or stylistically connected to him, but because it had been my own winter coat for some years, and I had used it in all the presentations of this research. I first used this coat to create an image in the presentation to supervisors in 2009, and it remained in each performance that followed. In that first performance, I was looking for a way to disappear: black clothing, and a black coat to hide hands and face so as to blend into the black background curtain. I deeply wanted to evade my own presence. I counted to twenty, holding the coat up in front of me, holding a stage moment of stillness and silence. The audience of three reacted strongly and in different ways, with different associations and readings, seeing travel, relatives escaping the Europe of World War Two, a body facing forward and back at the same time, or a body hanging in space. It generated the first discussion in the project about physical images and their effectiveness.

I used the coat image in all the presentations, and in the final version it had developed, via an idea of black coat or coats as a Brechtian half-curtain, into the final stage design of coats as figures, crowds, repetition of image, outlining of stage space, individuals, and hunchback. It also remained as a fifteen-second moment of stage time when I, and Walter, could not speak. From an early point I also thought of it in terms of physical metaphor by which stage language could be expanded. More than symbol, or iconography, the coat could be used to expand my repertoire of physical expression. This coat, the coat I wore as Benjamin, incorporated stage time, invisibility, waiting, silence, cold, comfort, warmth, loneliness, fear, sadness, and death; and since the performances I have not worn it at all.

Other physical and visual elements developed over years in this project. In the first presentation in December 2009 I had lain out a long row of books on the floor and rolled over them: the image was read as clichéd by one supervisor, but as a form of Benjamin’s essay ‘Unpacking My Library’ by another.\(^ \text{125} \) This fragment re-emerged in

\(^{125}\) W Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library', (1931), trans. H Zohn, in Selected Writings 2, pp. 486-93.
a transmuted and more violent form two years later in the box of books tipped over my head in the final play. I was annoyed by these books, pouring them over my head, raining down, into the brain. I was physically assaulting myself with them, but they don’t sink into the mind that way. I did not care that they got damaged each time I tipped them over myself and onto the floor; I wanted to express through physical and visual metaphor my deeply ambivalent relationship with the engagements and entanglements of reading in my life. This first physical disruption of a persona or character on stage led to the first spoken words of the play. Must I throw books away in order to be able to speak?

Other objects developed as physical metaphors too. The furniture was intended to contain or do more than its obvious function: unexpected things in unexpected places; objects that opened or transformed or collapsed; objects that presented puzzles in form and content. Related to this was the choice not to use electrically powered objects, apart from the exegetic forms of light and sound, but rather to gather intricate mechanical forms: wind-up gramophones and phonographs, a Rex Rotor printer, a portable harmonium in an ingenious wooden case. This reflected my interest in Walter Benjamin’s own affection for the tangible, the artisanal, the crafted and the unique, out of which, as a deliberately fashioned contradiction, came his readiness to interrogate new forms at a time when they were sweeping away his older loves.

I feel some of that love for an early non-electrical form of reproducibility, the 78rpm recording and the machines on which it is played (although electrical recording techniques and even players date back to the 1920s). I have fitfully collected 78rpm recordings since my mid-teens in the late 1960s. The fragility of the three recordings that I used in the performances echoed Benjamin’s love of the ephemeral, and of history: I dropped and broke my Louis Armstrong original 78 recording of Mack the Knife in rehearsal; Paul Robeson and the recording of Ol’ Man River connected me with my father (and I’ve recently discovered an old framed photographic portrait of a smiling Robeson in my father’s possessions); and the 1918 recording of gas shelling in the WWI trenches I used to represent Benjamin’s distrust of technology and its uses in war is one of the most emotionally powerful historical artefacts I have ever encountered.

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126 They were all books I felt I ought to have read, but which had failed to retain my attention, including Sartre, Levi-Strauss, and Habermas.
The use of objects in the play is also about the metaphorical significance of broader collections. Walter Benjamin is associated with an interest in objects, thoughts and details as a collector; it is in the gathering of these that he then assembled and articulated their meanings in new ways, theorising them as constellations, new idea-objects and patterns that come into being. Gershom Scholem describes Benjamin’s relationship with objects, and the speculative process they engendered:

Benjamin’s deep, inner relationship to things he owned – books, works of art, or handcrafted items, often of rustic construction – was evident. For as long as I knew him, even during my last visit with him in Paris, he loved to display such objects, to put them into his visitors’ hands, as he mused over them aloud like a pianist improvising at the keyboard.127

As I worked on this project it became apparent that objects would be a major part of the presentation of my autobiography and the dramaturgy I was developing, creating new combinations in my work and my life. The term autotopography has been used to

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describe the significance of objects that imprint on a person, and become extensions of mind and body. Smith and Watson write:

The autotopography may act either as a revelation or as a kind of screen memory to aid the forgetting of a traumatic moment … It draws from life events and cultural identity to build a self-representation as a material and tactical act of personal reflection.128

I find I use objects in these ways: in the play objects triggered thoughts, responses and scenes. Books, too, played this role, having a physical presence, colour and texture, and a range of associations imbued in them. The various books of my grandfather conjured up an extraordinary range of associations with my family life and background, and I made use of these books in the play. The content of my life, Walter’s life, and that of many people in my family, is largely made up of objects, artefacts and books. This is not unusual in our cultures, under the realities of commodities and capital, but it has a specific form in my family that shares features with that of Benjamin. An uncle once said to me, in the context of a discussion about families and relationships, that he preferred objects to people. ‘There is too much stuff!’ I say of Benjamin early in the play, and nothing defines my affinity with him more than this. Collecting fragments is a principle of his and my existence, evidenced in my accumulations in real life, my

128 S Smith and J Watson, op. cit., p. 262, drawing on the work JA Gonzalez.
collecting for the show, and the appeal that gathering holds for me, including in theoretical ideas. Exaggerated hoarding, books, clutter and mess are the necessary perils of this research. I now live in a space that is significantly fuller than it was three years ago. I drove to Sydney and came back with a car stuffed full of family objects. Money and budgets disappeared into the realm of fantasy, and objects and ideas became more important to me than food and drink.

At the extreme of this compulsiveness in December 2011, I became intrigued by the Japanese *tansu* and its movable, modular qualities, its asymmetries, and its mysteries. The puzzle boxes and their hidden spaces led me on to acquire these wooden chests of various sizes. Since the first presentation I’ve been accumulating stuff and showing it to audiences in a classic, childhood show-and-tell style, one that still engages us as adults. I show it because it interests me; I don’t know or try to predict its associations for anyone else. Some of it is interesting to me because of family history: my grandfather’s chest was the first object I started using in the play, and I recall the intensity with which I asked my mother for her permission to borrow it; and the same applied to the Czech typewriter of my father. Some stuff simply draws me in the moment. However, it is the arrangement, the shifting synthesis of objects in a particular collection, that gives a
deeper meaning created by the collector, as Walter Benjamin argues, just as my play acquires its deeper significations, no matter how open to different readings, from my selection and ordering of content.

Once the script began to take shape, the objects I was using became the elements of the set, a literal and directorial putting-in-the-scene (mise-en-scene). I became fascinated by the physical presence of wooden objects that opened and revealed other objects, allowing their unpacking, physically and metaphorically. My grandfather’s chest was the first of these, by virtue of the amount of other stuff that could be contained or hidden within it, and because of its signification of travel, a major theme in Benjamin’s writings. It belongs historically to the period before World War Two, and also reflected a Brechtian technique, that of using real, worn historical objects on the stage. I came to understand that the hidden and revealed objects were a physical expression of the personal themes I was exploring. The old and collapsing cabinet, serendipitously acquired from a roadside hard rubbish dealer for $30 a few weeks before the final

performances, was a wonderful object for expressing this. It was the seventh player in the *mise-en-scene*, visually reinforcing the motif of repetition and mechanical reproduction.

Dramaturgically, I arranged its collapse early in the play’s structure in order to disrupt the image of controlled narrative: after that, the internal chaos of my thought could emerge without me having to labour the point physically. Further objects came from within the collapsed structure. Boxes opened and revealed other objects or more boxes or nothing at all, just as ideas nested within ideas. A revelation might only lead to an evasion, and the presentation of self might only be another persona or character. The process of discovery and of questioning does not end, although the physical metaphors anchor the fragments in patterns of meaning. The articulation of these contradictions metaphorically through the use of objects creates passages between the inner world of the self and the outer physical and social environment, and each person has an idiosyncratic way of doing this. Each of us, my research suggests, can find appropriate and powerful ways to represent this artistically.

**Selves/Personae (shifts of presence)**

Theatre is the performative mode par excellence, with its multiple levels of presentation and representation. Actors can potentially embody these levels in performance modes, characters, personas and passions, acquiring the skills to negotiate the multiple play of these with other actors, the performance environment and the audience. I explored in the scene of the tree the theatrical pleasures of Shakespeare underlying those I derive from Brecht and Benjamin. I love playing a tree; I loved playing this tree. Snug reassures his audience that he is not a lion; I wanted to reassure my audiences that I was not pretending to be unaware of the theatricality of pretending to be a tree, and that I was not trying to hide my pleasure in this traditionally clichéd acting exercise.

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The scene was one of the earlier script pieces, from July 2011. It quotes Benjamin from his 1931 diary entries, on June 21, not long after his reflections on drugs and suicide and the account of his holiday with Brecht and Elizabeth Hauptmann at Le Lavandou, which became other scenes in the play. It became a complex task of representation, the levels of selves overlapping like the leaves of the tree. I tried to recreate Benjamin under a tree. I then played the tree remembering Benjamin, rather than Benjamin remembering the tree, and in being the tree then quoting Benjamin I was enjoying being the actor enjoying these levels of artifice (self, actor, tree, tree quoting Benjamin). The simple pleasures of this scene are appropriate to Benjamin’s mundane reflections on the metaphors visible in a tree, which I contrast with my own reflections over the years when looking at the extraordinary tangle of the immense *ficus macrophylla* or Moreton Bay fig tree at Melbourne’s Botanic Gardens. A huge mass of trunks, limbs, hanging and writhing roots, and intensely green leaves always make me think of the brain, blood vessels, nerves, ideas, and thoughts in their fluttering thousands. In performance therefore, the simple-mindedness of my Snug-the-Joiner tree matched some seemingly mundane theatrical conventions to Benjamin’s mundane metaphors. Every scene and fragment in the play developed out of this kind of relationship between concept, writing and the acting performance, and each represents a distinct attitude. Rather than assuming a single point of view or interpretation, the small details are there for reflection, exploration and discovery.
In this I am taking Walter Benjamin’s work as a specific model; for example, *One-Way Street* focuses on details and fragments and is formally inventive and non-linear.\(^{132}\) My writing of the tree scene follows this principle, with its anachronistic references to the Australian bush; with the actor playing the tree quoting Benjamin; and with the scene itself following that of the raised coat, and that scene coming out of a moment where the personas of both Walter and David have reached a point of muteness. *One-Way Street* also jumps between moments, topics and perspectives, as though Benjamin has had enough of one thought, goes close to revelation, and then retreats into the implicit claim that there is more knowledge to be gleaned by a reader from the interplay of fragments in the overall work.

**A contradictory synthesis: the final scene (resisting revelation)**

The final scene exemplifies the multiple levels of my various presences and representations in the work, sometimes overlapping them at the one time, in the script, or the performance, or the audience perception. I present myself representing Walter Benjamin, who is in fact still me. I ask the audience to believe that the text is referentially accurate to real events. In the theatre, with myself as a subject as well as  

performer, the stories of Benjamin and others become a part of my story, but also express mine through proximity, if not analogy. Without my autobiography as a part of it, the presentation of Walter Benjamin would simply be subject to the adaptable conventions of fiction, and the needs of a different dramaturgy.

I used the pills to represent Walter Benjamin’s suicide in the earliest stages of my performance research, but this was also autobiographical, related to my family, and the performative aspects of this are serious and confronting. To speak of suicide is to engage with its possibility; to enact it is to imagine its detail in mind and body. The costs, or the risks, of such performative exploration have to be balanced against the usefulness of the insights gained. Benjamin’s 1931 diary entries pose these issues in a similar way. In one entry, clearly expressing a state of deep, lethargic depression, he writes of specific plans to kill himself, including thoughts about the method, place and time. The length of the continuing entry suggests to me that writing and thinking about a range of cultural and intellectual topics kept him alive. These commitments to intellectual questioning keep me alive too. While never overtly suicidal, my struggles with depression have shaped a lifelong strategy: to continually question everything in an angst-ridden way. Answers are always inadequate to the task.

At the earlier La Mama presentation in March 2011 this scene engendered responses that led me to the idea that the actions presented could overlap characters or selves: was it Walter Benjamin taking the pills, or was I? Was I really taking pills? Yes. Was I really overdosing on morphine at that moment? No, but some people felt the shock of that possibility, although I suspect this was more likely with those who knew me well. This was a conventional, dramaturgically strong scene, in a context where I was resisting such effects, but not as conventional as I initially thought. The blurring of self and actor and persona and character was extreme here. I developed this scene as an exposition of the elements of a conventional dramaturgy (character, narrative climax and end, lighting, and music). It concluded the final version of the play, and completed a major thematic strand: depression and possible suicide in relation to origins, family, creativity, and life circumstances. Depression and suicide exist in my family; it existed at a number of points in Walter’s life; it exists in the need to struggle to create meaning.

After the final performance, a couple of friends expressed the view that another David scene was needed after this scene: the conclusion of narrative and performance with Benjamin’s death meant, they said, that David disappeared. How many selves and personas are expressed as David in the work, let alone other subjects and characters, and the seemingly stable actor, always assumed to be singular? In the context of the
work I now think the scene is rightly hard to reduce to its seeming conventions, and that it highlights the complexity of context that every individual audience member brings to it. My effacement in that moment was complex, because many layers of David and Walter Benjamin were involved (self, actor, persona, character, historical figure), and the theatrical and narrative moment was a final evasion (as is suicide). Although this scene displayed elements of the most conventionally dramatic dramaturgy, including a music that might have emotionally overdetermined the moment, and although it enacted the moment of tragedy prefigured by the title of the play, it also drew on gestic and auratic elements, as potentially metaphorising physical objects were brought together around the body of the performer: coat, wine, pills, hat, spectacles and my father’s typewriter. The ending of a performance is often assumed to have the strongest effects of any scene, especially when a death parallels the end of the imaginary world displayed. The dramaturgy of tragedy may assume this, and historically the end of Benjamin’s life itself has had a profound effect on how he is viewed (alone, unrecognised, unlucky, a failure), but more is going on here in my play. The layering of a multiplicity of selves reaches for a synthesis or resolution, but various selves of David are still present after this autobiographical performance concludes. There is no clarifying revelation, or closure in the popular, psychological sense. The questions of life, not a sentimentalised representation of death, remain.

**Constellations (and non-linear narrative)**

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.¹³⁴

This is Walter Benjamin’s writing, not mine, for all that it sounds like a note to myself about my dramaturgy and my play: yes, fill the stage with stuff, with rubbish that becomes useful by being used.

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. [Awakening] 135

If you grant me image as a term that describe physical objects, presences, and moments on a stage, this passage brings us close to the concept of the constellation. I dare not attempt a more literal reading, because I don’t think Benjamin’s words work that way. My reading of his ideas is realised in the script and the performance. The work of my play has been to put fragments into patterns on stage, in non-linear sequences, as physical objects, as texts, and as personas and selves. Constellations are new patterns of ideas and of moments in history. They work as an alternative to linear histories and thoughts: they are patterns, and maps, grids and spirals of ideas on paper, as in the ‘Constellations: Graphic Forms’ chapter of the book Walter Benjamin’s Archive. My favourite item in this chapter, which I used in an early performance/presentation, is a single line shape resembling a brain, a sheep, a curled-up foetus or baby, with words written at various angles, translated surprisingly closely in both meaning and sound patterns from German to English as:

Sheep. my
Sleepikin
Sheep
sleep in
Off to sleep
Sleep must be
Sleep my kiddikin sleep

135 ibid., [N2a,3] p. 462.
The accompanying commentary identifies this particular graphic constellation as coming from an experimental session with mescaline. Other constellations link themes and ideas related to love and sex, anthropology, the daemonic, Charles Baudelaire, Marcel Proust, and Franz Kafka. One is titled ‘The Wind Rose of Success’.136 These ways of patterning knowledge and imagination model a dramaturgy that each of us can use, free of the conventions of linear narrative.

*The Arcades Project*, made up of thousands of quotations patterned in unexpected ways and mingled with Walter Benjamin’s comments and thoughts, takes his ideas of constellation and quotation to extraordinary lengths.137 In describing my life through various objects, ideas, writings of others, and even other autobiographies, I have been inspired by these works of Benjamin that assemble seemingly unrelated ideas into new patterns that then generate meaning in further open-ended ways for any reader, spectator or recipient. This is where the chaos of stuff and ideas and music and personas that pile up during the performance reach a synthesis that attempts to reveal far more than random fragments. This is where the evasions transform into some kind of creative, rather than narrative, revelation, with multi-faceted elements of a complete autobiography showing the shape of the whole person, including faults, absences, and gaps, showing the person as negative space and as a constellation in the night sky, the reference points bright against the immensity of the background.

This is what I have enacted on this stage, in this writing, and through this research, and it is the coherence of live performance, through mind and body and space and time, that has enabled me to do so. I present myself before you as an agent of creation and change. I won’t ever do so again in quite the same way, and no other person will either. All people have the capacity to present themselves in the moment, to perform themselves true to the contradictions they are inhabited by and inhabit, in the modes appropriate to their experience, skill and imagination. I suspect this is where all truly creative art comes from, and we are all capable of it.

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136 W Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin’s Archive*, op. cit., Chapter 9, pp. 231-249.
Conclusion

The techniques appropriate to a particular autobiography need to reflect available skills and knowledge. Particular modes of storytelling, statement, question, or discourse suit the particular autobiographer, as modes of performance suit stories. Objects express skills and knowledge; clothing expresses content; books and other cultural artifacts expand the possibilities of the autobiography. Personal historical and cultural contexts are drawn from what are usually considered secondary sources, but are as important a part of a person’s conscious existence as their family or their work. Autobiography includes one's thoughts, memories, dreams and imaginings. Given the huge range of possibilities, a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments can state: any timeframe or montage is possible. Techniques appropriate to this dramaturgy are wide-ranging, utilising in my case stories, texts, acting and singing skills, objects, clothing, books, ideas, and recordings.

A dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments refuses to prescribe content, form, context, practice, performer, or autobiographer. It demands simply that the individual telling their story recognises that all such choices are autobiographical. If a dramaturgy applies to an autobiographical project, a non-linear use of fragments, layers, objects, and selves is worth articulating. Objects and clothing with a rich history, personal, social, or historical, can be a powerful part of story-telling, no matter the age of the teller. The mode of narrative can be in forms that best express the teller’s life, skills, and passions: for example, acting, poetry, songs, singing, dance, painting, comedy, anecdote. Any autobiography contains fragments of many biographies. Any teller is made up of many selves. A dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments celebrates shifts between modes of expression and presences of selves.

I have given an account of autobiography and theatrical autobiographical performance through the performed and performative exploration of Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Bartlett and Rodric Adamson, and through myself as researcher, writer, deviser, performer, social individual and human animal, in order to contextualise my work.
I have often thought, although I know that this is another evasion, that my life is not particularly interesting in conventional biographical terms. I am not engaged by most biography and autobiography. It reaches out and grabs me when the artfulness of it becomes apparent, as it transcends the conventions in which it is developed.  

Rules come after the event. As Walter Benjamin writes, ‘a major work will establish a genre or abolish it; the perfect work will do both’, and he argues that the extreme example of a genre should be used as exemplar, not the average one. This is not an argument for the impossibility of generic classification or of comparative critique, it is an assertion of the impossibility of eliminating uniqueness even as we recognise similarity, and it is a celebration of the distinctive that exceeds the familiar. It allows us creativity and it respects agency. It justifies the assertion that axiomatically we are equal.

My performance project, The Tragic Suicide Of Professor Walter Benjamin, The Well-Known Academic Psychologist, is itself a field of enquiry teeming with questions, about Benjamin, history, revolution, family, identity, performance, the actor, the writer, the artist, live theatre, politics, media. The exploration of all of these questions through live autobiographical performance, and in particular though a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments, demonstrates a method for exploring what it is to be human, socially, physically and imaginatively, that need not be reduced to one register of intellectual investigation or discourse. I have developed a model for exploring my own autobiography, with the recognition that any autobiography contains fragments of other biographies. I have, in my own moment, fought for Walter Benjamin in the present.

I have presented my evasive self in the theatrical forms available to me: an open-ended form of montage has drawn me into expressing myself. Perhaps it is not accidental that my father was a film editor and my mother a film maker and historian, and that I browsed the writings of Eisenstein in my teens.

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138 J Rosenberg, East of Time, Brandl & Schlesinger, (no loc., Australia), 2005, does this: a holocaust autobiography with chapters modelled on a poetic and magical realist version of midrashim.

139 W Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, op. cit., p. 44.

140 ibid., p. 58.


142 S Eisenstein, Film Form: Essays in Film Theory; and The Film Sense, trans. J Leyda, World Publishing Company, Cleveland, 1964.
Brecht’s songs and poetry. I love Shakespeare, the arch-gatherer of all time (along with Bach). Singing is the greatest form of self-expression for me, and I prefer ballads, laments and lullabies to dance-based musics. I have presented these and other aspects of myself, rather than intending to reveal or interpret my life, and I have extended the Brechtian mode of splitting actor from character to explore various autobiographical selves. This in turn suggests that the self too is multiple and can be further split in any representation. I have suggested the lives of Benjamin and others parallel my own; but I have also explored their lives through presenting mine. I recognise that Benjamin’s depressive aspects, his restlessness, and his supposed failures constitute a part of his importance for us today: the estimation of failure itself becomes problematic. I discover Benjamin, and Bartlett, and myself, not only in the juxtapositions of montage, but by the shifts of performance register, from presentation of self or actor persona to suggestions rather than assertions of character. That I look to Benjamin as a model for this is a tribute to the performative nature of his explorations and writings asserted against the conventions of his time.

This performance project has created an original dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments that draws on Brechtian notions of distance, defamiliarisation, episode, juxtaposition, music, contradiction, gestus, and shifts of performer position in relation to content and audience, but it is inspired and shaped by the thought, work and life of Walter Benjamin; by his passions for books, small objects, and the details of history; by his revolutionary hopes and personal despairs, his friendships, his relationships, and the mysteries of human inter-dependence. Brecht’s work is too much his own; I need the time and space to be inspired by someone who doesn’t trump my every attempt at personal expression, and a dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments reflects the open-ended possibilities of any potential performer’s experience and means of expression. It explores a notion of multiple levels of actor presence: human, actor, persona and character, and the interplay between these as they blur and slip into or over each other. This, I argue, is made possible in autobiographical performance by recognising the incoherence of the self, and, conversely, by uniting the identities of creator, writer, performer and researcher. At the same time I have never been made so aware of the impossibility of making theatre by oneself. A dramaturgy of autobiographical fragments presupposes a cultural framework within which it resides and which it reflects, and it is notable that, like Walter Benjamin’s studies of commodity fetishism, my assembling of
fragments reflects a world of commodities that can be gathered in any combination, and a division of labour that gives me the time to do it.

The performative possibilities provided by live theatrical autobiographical performance spill over into the under-rated writing modes of the theatre: various forms of draft, script, performance notes and text. These modes of writing are tested and refined experientially through rehearsal and performance. I retain these scripts as written, creative-research artefacts. The triple, autobiographical writing presence survives: the primary journal, creative scripts, and research analysis. The performances survive in photographs and video recordings, although the experience of the live performance remains only in memory.

Live theatre provides unique dramaturgies for the explorations of truth, history and fiction, resting on the key contradiction of real actions in a representational universe. Any theatre that goes beyond this contradiction, seeks to resolve it, is no longer framed as theatre, but enters realms of activism, ritual, religion, or psychology, even if it uses techniques of theatre to get there. Theatre tests the truths of representation, and, as Jennifer Wise suggests, its technologies of communication. That is why it is an art.

I am testing my own personalised forms of communication through the theatre, through autobiographical writing and performance, and creating a specific dramaturgy to enable this, in order to develop a new knowledge of the world. I do this in the present, in live theatre with an audience, or through writing, as you read this, now. I claim my use of Walter Benjamin as a revival of him that can only be in the present, in accord with his own views of history and time. It intrigues me that I can use his biography and his work in a moment that lights up this historical present, in my time. My personal experience exists as a part of history, reclaiming the past in the present, but only if I heed Benjamin’s warnings, and grasp the moments of possibility to shape the world of which I am part, creatively, socially, and politically. I may fail, but it suits my notions of a subjectivity that struggles to orient itself to its own objective existence, caught in the net of global insanity. My madness can only be seen as personal if you refuse to see the state of the whole world, now.

143 J Wise, Dionysus Writes, loc. cit.
Appendix: The Annotated Script

“The Tragic Suicide Of Professor Walter Benjamin, The Well-Known Academic Psychologist”

[Preset: CD: Roches 6: Can We Go Home Now?]


[Wait, look at audience, can’t speak, go to tansu, put on coat draped on 78 player, hat, spin spectacles on turntable, put them on. Open tansu drawers, get out books]

[to SR; tip box of books over head onto floor DSC]

‘The Tragic Suicide Of Professor Walter Benjamin, The Well-Known Academic Psychologist.’

This headline is completely wrong! Although I did die in tragic circumstances, attempting to escape to Spain from Nazi-occupied France. I never became a Professor. I

144 This script predates the performances; it is not a transcript. A DVD of the examination performance of June 22, 2012, is part of this documentation. See also: short videos of La Mama rehearsals/interview in February, 2012, online at:
http://vimeo.com/album/1848811/video/36879809
‘David Adamson – doKument’, shot and cut J Batchelor, Batchedit, 5m 23s, acc. 17/09/12.
http://vimeo.com/album/1848811/video/36377450
‘The Tragic Suicide Of Professor Walter Benjamin’, song promo, J Batchelor, Batchedit, 0m 55s, acc. 17/09/12.

145 References continue footnoting conventions from the exegesis, and share the same Reference List. In the footnotes to this Script I seek to convey my processes of thought, including the sources for many phrases and moments in my memory, and sometimes digressing in a Benjaminian intellectual form. This Script is not the direct object of the research, but an expression of it; nor is it the exegesis as such, so some references are not identified further than my memory of them.

146 MA Roche, ‘Can We Go Home Now’, The Roches, Can We Go Home Now, Rykodisc D31384, Track 6.

am NOT an academic psychologist. As Georg Steiner remarks, you couldn’t get a more Kafka-esque headline describing my death.\textsuperscript{148}

The people around me, past and present, want to put me in order, and make sure I surround myself with the like-minded and right-minded. They mistrust my ambiguities and contradictions. Do they really want to know who I am? I, Walter Benjamin, am the backward looking \textit{Angelus Novus}\textsuperscript{149} of our forward thinking time. I see myself wading with determination through the rubbish of our civilization, observing, thinking, writing.

So, how do you see me, young David?

\textit{[take off hat, glasses, hang coat on tansu handle]}

I, David Adamson, see Walter Benjamin as a mad collector of everything. Plethora. Excess.

Hannah Arendt, introducing the best known volume of his writings, \textit{“Illuminations,”}\textsuperscript{150} defined him for generations as a failure –

\textit{[collapse to the box, onto floor]}

– a failure in career, life, luck, and love. A FAILURE –

like me! We have a lot in common:

Walter Benjamin went to a progressive high school – like me.

He was involved in a youth movement – like me.

And against the war – me.

Poetry, theatre, art – me, me, me.

Marxism and politics – me, me.

Exploring mind-altering drugs – me.

Collecting books – me.

Interested in everything – me.

\textsuperscript{148} G Steiner, ‘To Speak of Walter Benjamin’, op. cit., p.16, refers to: ‘the obituary in the New York Yiddish and refugee newspaper \textit{Aufbau}, which reports 11\textsuperscript{th} October 1940 “The tragic suicide of Professor Walter Benjamin, the well-known academic psychologist”. One would have had to be Kafka to write that one.’


\textsuperscript{150} H Arendt, Introduction’, in W Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, op. cit., pp. 7-58. She is writing as much of bad luck as failure, and quotes Benjamin on Kafka, remarking that it applies to him: ‘What Walter Benjamin said of Kafka with such unique aptness applies to himself as well: “The circumstances of this failure are multifarious. One is tempted to say: once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him \textit{en route} as in a dream” (Briefe II, 764)’. See p. 22.
Unsustained relationships – me.
Depression and existential despair – me.
Suicide — not yet.\textsuperscript{151}

Our lives intertwine in a cosmic dance through constellations of knowledge and experience. I want to wander with him and wonder at everything. We share drugs and sex, neurosis and effort, culture and death, history and struggle.

But we'll always have Paris.\textsuperscript{152}

\textit{[wander stage, disappear, appear suddenly, head over top of coat stand]}

And we both are very interested in Brecht.
Bertolt Brecht was born in Augsburg in 1898.\textsuperscript{153}

\textit{[move into audience, then to DSC]}

we are fascinated by his relationship with the audience, his explorations…\textsuperscript{154}

brecht is a ground of sorts, but he needs to be handled with great care, those theatrical conventions when torn from his political engagement…

\textit{verfremdungseffekt}
\textit{unheimlich}
\textit{grundrisse}
\textit{gesamtkunstwerke}
\textit{urphanomene}
\textit{trauerspiel}
\textit{gestus}
\textit{spass}
\textit{hörigkeit}\textsuperscript{155}

\textit{[hand in pocket, waltzing: from The Tango Ballade}\textsuperscript{156}]

gestus: Eckehardt Schall, epileptic actor according to brecht,\textsuperscript{157} hand in the pocket intimacy… what is gestus? What’s the point? A phrase, a tableau, a moment, an

\textsuperscript{151} I discovered the rhythm of this scene while working with Alex Pinder.
\textsuperscript{152} From \textit{Casablanca}, perhaps. I’m referencing the cliché here, not the source.
\textsuperscript{153} Personal memory of a misuse of \textit{verfremdungseffekt}: the opening words of a student Brecht performance, the actors in a row front stage wearing black t-shirts, direct to the audience, University of Adelaide, 1987.
\textsuperscript{154} This section referring to b brecht is uncapitalised, a well-known feature of much of brecht’s own writing.
\textsuperscript{155} German terms associated with Brecht (\textit{distanciation}, Freud (\textit{the uncanny}), Marx (\textit{outline}; also editorial title of early version of \textit{Das Kapital}), Wagner and Adorno (\textit{the total work of art}), Benjamin (\textit{essential phenomenon}?), Benjamin (\textit{mourning play}), Brecht (\textit{gestus}), Brecht (\textit{fun}), Brecht (\textit{subjection, bondage}).
\textsuperscript{157} Personal recollection: quoted in Brecht tutorial by Michael Morley, Flinders University, 1987. I recall seeing a video of Schall’s hand-in-pocket dance, but have not found it.
attitude, that points to a wider social reality of human interaction, exploitation, contradiction or possibility…

oh those tedious discussions counterposing collective authorship to individual brilliance! the marxist and the anticommunist orthodoxies of interpretation!

but the brilliant transposition of *mother courage* to 1970s mindanao!

an older czech couple once said to me: we had more than enough of 'brecht' in czechoslovakia, – incredibly boring!

I think it’s great, said walter
to 'do brecht' is extremely problematic. unless I'm there, not possible at all, said brecht

who cares about the activist traditions he has influenced, she said. It's hardly theatre at all. Content trumps form every time, even though it's really a matter of context

[jump on chest, fist in the air, Lenin pose]

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159 J Fuegi, *The Life and Lies of Bertolt Brecht*, HarperCollins, London, 1994. The inaccuracies and distortions of this tendentious book are extraordinary, from the witness-leading quotations out of context that serve as chapter headings, to the seeming expose of facts already well-known and published, to John Willett’s preliminary response that there were hundreds of factual errors noticeable at even a first reading. Personal recollection of conversation with Michael Morley, late 1994.

160 B Brecht, adapted R Vera, *Nanay Isog and Her Children/ Si Nanay Isog at ang kanyang mga anak* (no date), English/Tagalog unpublished typescripts. I participated in an in-house series of workshops in Manila in Jan-Feb 2009, which explored this adaptation (not produced or published, to my knowledge), in the context of the Philippines Educational Theatre Association’s long connection with Brecht’s work. Rody Vera, the writer, is also a wonderful performer of Brecht songs. For this Brecht connection from 1970, and over an extended time with East German theatre director Fritz Bennweit, see LL Samson et al. (eds), *A Continuing Narrative on Philippine Theatre: The Story of PETA*, Philippine Educational Theatre Association, Quezon City, 2008, pp. 147, and ‘Appendix A. PETA Productions 1967-2008’, pp. 655-691.

161 Personal conversation at a family barbecue, 2011. Czechoslovakia has a particular resonance for me: my father lived in Prague from 1948 to 1951; I collected Czechoslovakian stamps, and still do, vaguely; one of my favourite composers, for more than 30 years, is Leos Janacek of Brno (and he played the organ at geneticist Gregor Mendel’s funeral, in Brno).


163 I had thought I was just being rude here, but this poses an intriguing question about Brechtian performance: it depends on the relationships between the particular people involved.

164 ‘She said’ is a reference to the only exercise anyone usually comes up with as a Brecht actor training exercise; at Melbourne Workers Theatre in 1990 we used it in the creative development of *Black Cargo*, the John Romeril/Irine Vela musical based on a John Morrison short story of the same name. as far as I can tell, Brecht did not create an actor training method as such; the identifiable aspects of his method for actors are used in rehearsal.

165 This image of Lenin exists in many forms; I am thinking of a recreation of it by an actor in one of Eisenstein’s films, probably *October*.
but it changes lives, it really matters!

[get down, sit]

Yes, maybe it does. It’s all autobiographical. Walter’s life, Brecht’s life, my life, each and every life of you here: it’s a million fragments.166

Walter loved the quotation. In his massive, unfinished *Arcades Project* he writes: ‘This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage.’167

It’s all fragments. No life is a straight line. Biographies conceal and reveal. No one person is a single narrative. None of us know in advance what will be important. We stake claims to partial truths.168

And so, the pleasures of the episodic, the montage, the tangent, the moment, the fragment, Walter’s beloved quotation. Hidden revelation. Concealed truth.

[Can’t speak. Go to box of drafts]

How many drafts does this process take!169

[Throw pile of drafts onto wrecked cabinet. It collapses spectacularly.170 Push ladder and coat over. Open box, start metronome at bottom of wrecked cabinet. Get Chinese nesting boxes, small tansu from back of cabinet, take DSL to coat-covered medium tansu, reveal batik]

I can’t stand metronomes used in the theatre to represent the passing of time. Time doesn’t pass!

I think I need some music.

[Una Forma Mas, track #1171]

[Take out box. Show agates. Explain broken 78 pieces: Mack the Knife. Get Puzzle box, open, explain figures. Get other Puzzle box, open, open small box, show stone, get stone. Get other stone. Get Nicaragua box with Angel cards, improvise dialogue:172]

166 Approaches to autobiographical writing that emphasise the performative, self-creating aspects, and that flow through to theories of non-linear autobiographical presentations and creations of self in the theatre, are a major part of my exegetical explorations. See the work of Olney, Eakin, Lejeune, Dolan, and Heddon, op. cit.


168 *Partial truths* is a favourite wordplay of mine that I believe I invented some years ago, although it is unlikely to be original.

169 That is, developing the research, the performance, the script, the exegesis, all of which exist in varied written forms.

170 The collapse took much experimentation and rehearsal; after performances people asked if it was deliberate, even those who know my process well.

When I was rehearsing I dropped this record and it shattered. I had owned it since I was 15, Louis Armstrong singing Brecht’s ‘Mack the Knife’… then an audience member looking at them after a show dropped them again, and they broke into smaller pieces. I love agates, and some of these are pairs. This is a Wittner metronome I found in March: I have never seen one this art deco shape. By the way, this is a tansu that I found very cheaply in an op shop in March; I don’t think they had any idea what it was. I’ve discovered it has a secret locking mechanism [explain]. I became interested in tansu because: this is a Japanese puzzle box – my brother had one as a kid, and I thought of them last year, and went looking. I got these figures in Uzbekistan, in 1987: they seem to talk to each other. I really like these puzzle boxes – this one takes more moves, is very difficult…unless you find the approach, which I di straight away – you just turn it over and over… this little one works on the same principle… it get’s a bit boring… I can never remember where the rocks or shells I pick up come from – except this one. I picked up this rock when I was totally lost in the bush near Oberon, and call it the ‘Where the fuck are we?’ rock. This box is from 1980s revolutionary Sandinista Nicaragua, traditional folk art… Does anyone remember Angel Cards? You pick out inspiring words for the day… [one] [two] [three]

[3rd Angel card word: cue for lights up bright, freeze, then music]

[Madrugada\textsuperscript{173} Cuban music plays loudly]

[run mad, put on tailcoat, take out all seven 78 players, piece of bark, Rembrandt portrait, put up Breughel painting, kick over pile of metal boxes, dance, spin stand, open Rex Rota mimeograph, throw canes and roses into the air. Take off coat. Put on hat. End up beside Decca, out of breath\textsuperscript{174}]

[Cuban music cuts abruptly as needle is put on Gas Shelling 78 record, listen to Gas shells]

Gas Shell Bombardment: Actual record taken on the front line, France, near Lille, October 1918, Royal Garrison Artillery.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{172} Brecht/Weill/Blitzstein, ‘Mack The Knife’, sung by Louis Armstrong, 78 rpm recording, Capitol, matrix numbers unidentifiable on disc broken into small pieces. Agates from a gift shop in Adelaide in the 90s, going out of business; handmade figures from Samarkand or elsewhere on the Silk Road, 1988; puzzle boxes ordered through eBay from traditional Japanese makers, or so they claimed; tansu from op shop; metronome from antique market in March 2012; Angel Cards from the 1990s; Nicaragua box from the 1980s.


\textsuperscript{174} Coats: already owned or purchased cheaply in op shops; 78 record players bought at various markets and on eBay; piece of paperbark I could never throw away; print of Rembrandt self-portrait. Hat given to me by a friend in the early 1980s: an official issue Victorian Railways train shunter’s hat. The Decca metal reflector 78 player was popularly known as the Trench model, because it was supposedly used in the WWI trenches; as a model it was made until the 1950s; the identical Decca case without player was found on eBay, and led to the roadside rubbish collectors who sold me the wrecked, collapsing, early electrical 78 player/radio.

\textsuperscript{175} ‘Gas Shell Bombardment: Actual record taken on the front line–France, near Lille–Oct. 1918’, Royal Garrison Artillery, single-sided 78 rpm recording, HMV/The Gramophone Co. Ltd, 09308 (Matrix nos. 09308, HO 3479). Label also reads: ‘This record is listed in Catalogue No.2 which contains records of
‘This Way to the Planetarium.’ Walter Benjamin, 1926.

In World War I, ‘Human masses, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open countryside, high-frequency currents criss-crossed the landscape, new constellations arose in the heavens, the skies and the deeps of the ocean throbbed with the vibrations of propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug into Mother Earth.

‘This immense courtship of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale, namely in the spirit of technology. But because the ruling class’s lust for profit thought to have its way with it, technology betrayed humanity and turned the bridal bed into a blood bath.

Mastery over nature, so the imperialists teach, is the goal of all technology. But who would trust a school-master who proclaimed the aim of education to be the mastery of children by adults? Is not education above all the indispensable ordering of the relationship between the generations, and therefore, if we are still to use the term, mastery of those relations, not of the children? Likewise, technology is not the mastery of nature but of the relations between nature and humankind.  

[listen to conclusion of record]

But that’s enough of that, let’s talk about me.

[take off coat]

[Get table from chest, sit, assemble table while singing]

Miserere my maker, have mercy on me a wretch
Fully distressed, for bound with sin oppressed
Mightily vexed with my soul’s bitter anguish
Into my death I languish
But if it please thee, to heed my ceaseless crying
Miserere, miserere, miserere
I am dying

unique and historical interest not included in general record catalogue’. I purchased this via a Camberwell Market dealer among many records in late 2011, and only realized its significance some weeks after I had obtained it. I regret another 78 that was broken: Lyrebirds recorded in Sherbrooke Forest, near Melbourne, with commentary.


177 Anonymous lament, 1620s (this date is from memory, when I once searched for the sheet music in a library). I transcribed and learnt this lament years ago from an Alfred Deller LP recording.
I bought this table at Camberwell Market a year ago thinking it was interesting. Every time I open it I think it’s even more interesting…

A raconteur needs a table to talk about the pleasures of life. My life.

- Fear Crying Paralysis Love Lust Death
- Childhood issues, Premature, Post traumatic, Drug induced psychotic
- Rebellious, Male, Addictive, Malingerer
- Unfit, Bad nutrition, Poor impulse control, Cognitive deficit, Repetitive strain
- Depression, Existential crisis, Vitamin D deficiency, Seasonal Affective Disorder
  S.A.D., sad
- Over-intellectualising, Achievement and Commitment phobic, Andropause
- Dreamer, Actor, Singer, Poet, Artist
- 20th century disease, hypochondria, chronic fatigue
- or: ‘David Adamson Syndrome! also known as body-mind dysmetaphoria!178

[Bach music Tk10: Ach Golgotha179]

[get coffeeepot: unscrew, juggle, let fall. Get journal and my ordinary spectacles]

I’ve been keeping a journal charting my intellectual progress through this PhD. I’m up to volume 49. This is volume 35, 11th of April, 2011:

listening to Bach, coffee on a routine, pot apart, rinse and scrub the three parts, water to the right level, dry hands, open fridge, open jar, coffee into pot, screw together, coffee jar into fridge, light gas, coffeeepot on stove, turn gas down — what to eat, decide to eat avocado which is on breadboard because I thought I had missed its ripeness last night (as usual), open fridge, get the Natural Tucker180 multigrain rye bread out of fridge, slice it thin, bread in fridge, slices in toaster, turn toaster temperature up because it’s been in the fridge, cut the avocado perfectly, knife meets its own line, avocado surprise surprise is perfect, one half into sealed container into fridge, toast isn’t down so push it down, honey into coffee bowl, plate for toast, lemon would be nice if I had any, oh I do!, cut lemon, saucer for one half, coffee bubbling, turn off coffee, get vitamin pill and St John's Wort, ignore herbs and vitamin D, toast is up, push down again, plate for serving, bring toast up, put on plate, slice avocado each slice onto toast as I cut it, pour coffee into bowl and stir in honey, half lemon squeezed onto avocado, add half-squeezed half-lemon to lemon on saucer, saucer into fridge, milk out of fridge, add milk to coffee, milk into fridge, pills still in my hand,

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178 These definitions all seem to be accurate, and there are more. When I first wrote a draft of this list, I titled it: ‘How do I define myself?! Let me count the ways’, referring to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘How do I love thee?’ See D Shields, 2010, Penguin, London, 2010, for a disruptive exploration of intertextuality, authorship, attribution, and copyright, without quotation marks (but on the page after the contents he makes three attributions, the first of which is a badly truncated quotation of Walter Benjamin, without a source or context, but which I use below in the script: ‘A major work will either establish the genre or abolish it; and the perfect work will do both’ – I have italicized the missing clause).

179 JS Bach, St Matthew Passion, BWV244, No.59 ‘Ach Golgotha’, on An Introduction to the Complete Works of Johann Sebastian Bach, Edition Bachakademie: The Millenium Edition, Haenssler CD 92 920, sung by Ingeborg Danz, Bach-Collegium Stuttgart conducted by Helmuth Rilling. I finally purchased the complete 173-CD set, of which this is a sampler, very cheaply in 2011, after 10 years of hankering for it.

180 A Melbourne organic and sourdough bakery.
cracked pepper onto avocado, salt grinder salt onto avocado, cut toast two slices with
avocado across into halves, onto plate, final stir of coffee, avocado on plate and coffee
bowl and pills into lounge room, put them down, last night's water to swallow pills, last
night's crockery to kitchen, back to lounge room, stand a moment with head spinning,
think: how many details and moves did I just make for this simple breakfast? –
sit, get journal, write all this down, think: I haven't started breakfast yet, it's getting
cold, I'm running out of time, what time is it?, look at VCR clock across room, it's
9.02am. Yes, now I'm late. At this moment my 9.00am 'It's time to leave!' phone alarm
goes off. I love avocado, hardly ever think to eat it, it's perfect –
think, 'be careful: Walter Benjamin and Spalding Gray both killed themselves.'

[Putting on coat and hat]

Don't worry, we keep it in the family.

Walter Benjamin's diary, June 3, 1931.

In front of the Potinière in Le Lavandou. A very cold wind is blowing. I am there with
Brecht, Elisabeth Hauptmann, and others. I had gone for a walk on my own to St Clair.
On the way, I was struck by the dog roses. I picked one; it had a wonderful fragrance. I
passed a bush full of peonies. They reminded me vividly of the bunch of flowers Jula
Cohn once gave me years ago for my birthday. I broke off a small twig and put it,
together with the dog rose, between the pages of Jouhandeau's 'Journal du Coiffeur,'
which I was carrying. On the way, as I was passing the Villa Mar Belo, where Brecht
and the others were staying, I thought I would stop in. And in the somewhat labile state
this first walk on my own for such a long time had induced in me, I probably did so at
least partly because I had grown tired of following a pretty girl in a red beach-jacket and
blue trousers who had been walking along the highroad in front of me in the twilight.
The worst thing was that she suddenly stopped to talk to a man she had met, so that I
would have been forced to walk on past her. So I went down the side path to the villa
and entered the hall. Brecht came out to meet me. We talked for about two hours –

[sitting on chest, then immediately standing]

– until I felt it was time to go. As I picked up my book the flowers peeked out of it, and
when someone joked about them my embarrassment grew, since even before I had
entered the house I had been wondering why I was arriving bearing flowers and whether
I shouldn't throw them away. But I hadn't done so, God knows why. There was
undoubtedly an element of defiance in it. Needless to say, I realized there would be no
opportunity to give my rose to Elisabeth Hauptmann –

[sitting, then slowly stand]

– so I decided I would at least hoist it like a flag. But this idea was a complete failure. In
the face of Brecht's ironic jokes, I no less ironically presented him with the peony,
keeping a firm grip on the dog rose. Of course, Brecht refused to accept it. I ended up
putting the peony unobtrusively into a large vase full of blue flowers next to me. The

181 In the development process of script out of research process and an ongoing journal, this was the
second piece I wrote, transcribed from the journal in which it was described as it happened.
dog rose, however, I threw in among the blue flowers from above. There it stuck, looking as if it were growing out of the blue flowers—a veritable botanical curiosity. And there it remained quite clearly. So the bunch of flowers had hoisted my flag after all, and had to take the place of her for whom it was intended.  

[take off coat, hat]

\[O\; sweet\; mystery\; of\; life\; at\; last\; I’ve\; found\; you,\]
\[O\; at\; last\; I\; know\; the\; meaning\; of\; it\; all…\]  

Memory, forgetting… I’d like to talk about…

[can’t speak; get up, go to coats USL]

This is a standard-issue bus driver’s raincoat, Sydney 1983.  

This is the coat I wore as Edward Curr the squatter in Yanagai! Yanagai!  

This cape was worn by all of us in the wonderful Cyrano de Bergerac As Told By Three Idiots…  

If there are questions after a show, the cliché question from the audience is the truth: how do you learn all those lines?  

Well, actually, it’s a very serious question…

Frankenstein's Children: opening night of my first professional show: in the final speech I jumped back into the middle of the play…

Multiple characters in Macbeth, playing Duncan and MacDuff and some lines of Lennox or Ross, I ended up confused, couldn’t remember O Horror! Horror! Horror!, and said instead O Awful! Awful! Awful!

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182 W Benjamin, ‘May-June 1931’, op. cit. This comes at a low ebb, and contains a number of dated entries where he talks of tiredness, reflecting on the past to avoid the future, his three significant loves, and suicide. Unpublished in his lifetime, in the Harvard edition it is immediately followed by the article ‘Unpacking My Library’, which was published in July 1931. See Selected Writings 2, pp. 469-485, and pp. 486-493.  

183 I love singing these two lines, and significantly I remember the second one wrongly, singing the philosophical word meaning instead of the romantic word secret. ‘Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life!’ made famous by Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy; I learnt these phrases from that recording.  

184 I worked for four months as a public transport bus driver in Sydney, up and down George St and Paramatta Rd: the most stressful job in the world. I didn’t last long.  

185 A James, Yanagai! Yanagai!. Produced by Melbourne Workers Theatre and The Malthouse, Melbourne 2004; Regional Victoria and Wales/UK tours, 2006.  

186 E Rostand, adapted by ensemble, Cyrano de Bergerac As Told By Three Idiots, La Mama Courthouse and Victorian regional tour, 1998. Devised by ensemble: director Alex Pinder, actors Glynis Angell, Bruce Naylor, and myself. A premise of the production was that we would frequently argue about who got to play Cyrano in the next scene, swapping cape and nose to do so.  


188 W Shakespeare, Macbeth, adapted and produced in the Convent Gallery de-consecrated chapel, Daylesford, 2000, by The Old Van Theatre.
Waiting for Godot: I saw a wonderful performance where the actors continually needed prompting for lines that were about remembering and forgetting...

What was I saying…? O I’m so sorry, I forgot to thank the original owners of the land here, the Wurundjeri people. thank you… when I was a kid we visited elderly friends of my grandparents who lived in a little house with a beautiful, mysterious, English garden running riot with old-world flowers, on top of a cliff overlooking the wonderful Hawkesbury sandstone escarpments near Berowra Waters… carved into the flat sandstone near their house, unremarked, I discovered a large rock-art fish – it was this big! – no really, it was this big!

The national amnesia: yes yes, aboriginal culture, so important, and then forget as soon as we turn away, can’t fund more than one aboriginal play this season – my immediate family has connections with all sorts of aboriginal Australian history, from the outside: Ian Dunlop’s films, the Gurindji struggle, Croker Island, Noonkanbah in WA, the early campaign against Black Deaths in Custody, leaflets at the 1967 referendum… Faith Bandler, a leader of that struggle, lived for a time in the 1950s with my grandparents. Bartlett Adamson the communist poet...

When I toured in Yanagai! Yanagai! to Wales, the Welsh audiences would say: what can we do to help the Yorta Yorta land claim? Here in Australia the dominant culture is blind, it always thinks it already knows what matters, I stagger, always feel out of place, dislocated, what, where is my meaning and culture?... I remember, I forget… the personal is always political and I take politics personally...

[Byzantine music plays]

What is it about pills and drugs? There's something about pills and drugs. The thing about pills and drugs is...

1927… Walter Benjamin… ‘show someone the mask (the mask of one’s own face, that is, the displayer’s face). Dr Frankel, please don't go...’

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190 In 2011 a momentary public debate surfaced about the institutional recognition of the traditional owners of country in venues, at events and at public occasions, with some commentators and politicians claiming that it was unnecessary political correctness. From memory.
191 I’m paraphrasing both an old joke and its use in the play Yanagai! Yanagai! (see below)
192 I can’t recall where I overheard this comment, but it may have had to do with the prospects of touring Yanagai! Yanagai! nationally in 2004.
193 Various memories and participations. There is another play right there.
Wow. Look at that velvet sky, over Nimbin, 1973. It's a tapestry of transparent rainbow edged gum leaves. Hey, they say...giggle...when you're on magic mushrooms you can never finish rolling a cigarette, isn't that ridiculous...giggle...197

1927: Item 13: ‘Oven turns into cat. The word ginger is uttered and suddenly in place of the desk there is a fruit stand, in which I immediately recognize the desk. The Thousand and One Nights comes to mind.’198

Hi David...HI Sara sara sara... oh, are you stoned...yeah, magic mushrooms, blue, those gum leaves... hey David, come and have a shit, it's fantastic when you're tripping... Simon... aren't you dead a few years later??... yeah, air bubble, good shit though...199

Protocol of the Mescaline Experiment of May 22, 1934… ‘Dr Frankel, please don't leave me!’ His breathing is quickened; there are frequent groans, and violent, jerky movements of the shoulders… Frankel decides to remain, but that changes nothing so far as the inconsolable sorrow of the subject is concerned. ‘Sorrow... the veil that hangs unmoving and pines for a breeze that would rouse it.’200

Hey David, are you ok?????????... NNNNNOOOOOoooooo but it’s silent... Lilon and Joel have left... Jimi Hendrix is an underground cult leader... oh that music, Dark Side of the Moon wailing... where are all my clothes... oh, here's another fucked up kid... who are all these people in cars... where does this highway go... strychnine, vitamin B... why is my brother back from Adelaide... my fingers are the inside of my stomach feeling nauseous... where am I, what day is it...hi Mum, hi Greg...I'm going to bed...I'll see you in...201

[stagger to get coat, hold, get piece of paper]

May-June 1931: ‘I have often wondered if my particular irenic [pacific, conciliatory] nature is not linked to the contemplative spirit engendered by the use of drugs. The universal reservations toward one’s own way of life, which are forced upon every writer – without exception, I believe – by contemplation of the situation in Western Europe, are related in a bitter way to the attitude toward other human beings that is induced in the drugtaker by the poison he takes. And to take the full measure of the ideas and impulses that preside over the writing of this diary, I need only hint at my growing willingness to take my own life.’202

[can’t speak, move USC against blackness of back curtain, hold coat high concealing face for 15 seconds, drop coat, hands reaching up]

Theatre is transformation!

197 I’m quoting myself at 17, in May, 1973 at Nimbin, staggering from campfire to campfire, never managing to roll the cigarette.
199 I still see her occasionally, and I still talk of him with friends.
201 It was an incredibly bad acid trip, in 1973, which I still feel physically when reminded of it.
Give me the space to say No! and I can fill the world with Yes!  
My crisis/opportunity...

Kensho epiphany eureka dark night of the soul...  
To brush history against the grain…  
The true image of the past flits by…  
A memory flashes up at a moment of danger…  
Time stands still, thinking suddenly stops, shocks, crystallizes…  
A revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past…  
It little profits that an idle king...  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield...  

[climb on Chest]

I am a tree. But do not be afeared, gentlemen and ladies, I am not really a tree, I am an actor who loves playing a tree. So, when I shake my branches, do not be afeared that they will fall on you, like the branches of river redgum after rain, when you have unknowingly camped in frail tents on stolen land.

I live at the top of an embankment between Marseilles and Paris. The other day I caught some thoughts from a breeze rustling through my leaves. I was being remembered by Walter B, a speculative philosopher of the airiest sort. I heard him whisper these words:

‘I then lay down under a tree. There was a bit of a breeze; and a tree with very pliant, swaying boughs. As I looked up into the foliage and followed its movements, it suddenly occurred to me how many images and metaphors are nesting in a single tree. The branches and the treetop sway up and down reflectively, and bend away in rejection; the boughs, depending on the way the wind is blowing, lean toward you or fly upward; the mass of leaves resists the demands of the wind, recoils from them, or comes to meet them; the trunk has the solid ground on which it stands; and one leaf casts a shadow on another. Postscript to Brecht’s studies on dwelling and ideas in general: dwelling in a hotel – the idea that life is a novel.’

[step down]

This imagery, Walter’s writing, this play, my project, what is it? What genre? What meaning? Metaphors, books, speculation, shadows, concealment and the dappled light

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203 This is authentic me: I’ve felt this for as long as I can remember.
204 Popular new age wisdom; the Chinese character for ‘crisis’ is the same as that for ‘opportunity’.
205 Zen awakening, religious realization, scientific breakthrough, passing through despair.
207 A Tennyson, ‘Ulysses’, first and last lines of the poem, from memory.
209 References a well-known hazard in Victoria, in areas of river redgum such as in the Barma-Millewa State Forest, Murray River, Victoria and NSW, a part of Yorta Yorta country.
of truth? Walter says: ‘A major work will either establish the genre or abolish it; and the perfect work will do both.’

[cross DSR]

Where have all the songs gone?
Where do I belong?
Where have all the songs gone?
Where do I belong?
Going out to dinner
So I won’t get thinner
Where have all the songs gone?
Where do I belong?
Take some red wine to drink
So I don’t have to think
Where have all the songs gone?
Where do I belong?
Is there heaven somewhere
Up in the air?
What does it all mean?
La vida es sueno
Life is a dream
Where have all the songs gone?
Where do I belong?

[music starts, Can We Go Home Now? Roches Track 6]

[sit on chest]

I sometimes do not wish to go to sleep, because I have endlessly strange, nightmarish dreams. The other week I dreamed the end of the world was happening tomorrow, a comet or something, and I seriously thought, I probably couldn’t cope with the struggles if I survived; I think I would probably suicide. Sometimes I feel I have no skin, just exposed flesh and raw pain. I am an uncontained individual.

‘Task for next week: add hints to script: childhood stuff, nightmares, being looked at, evasion…’ A week later I’ve been unable to add a word…

211 I like this image. I think I made it up, coming out of being a tree.
212 W Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, op. cit., p. 44. It is the concluding sentence of the ninth of 15 sections of his ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’, a complex statement of methodology that I interpret as claiming that the research writing will and must be unique to its subject of enquiry and analysis.
213 The title of a 17th century Spanish play by Calderon.
214 I made this song up while driving to visit friends, April 2012, and I refer to it as the silly song, but I’ve come to see how autobiographical it is. I have no idea what the tune references; as far as I know I made it up.
215 MA Roche, ‘Can We Go Home Now’, loc. cit. A return to the preset music.
216 From my journal. It is too much for me to approach directly: hence the flow of many aspects of this work: hint/ promise/ evasion, Benjamin/ Brecht/ me/ family/ politics, montage/ collage/ narrative,
I had a dream in my teens that I never remembered, but I talked in my sleep and said this: ‘But what does it all mean??’ Long long pause. Then I said: ‘Ohhh – I see…’ Another teenage dream, where my friends said: ‘We know you are not really sixteen, you’re really 61, but you reversed the numbers.’ I was raised to believe that people are basically nice, but I find now I don’t like them much, and fear them, unless I get to know them. Sometimes I think I’m a misanthrope, a misandrist, a misogynist (I definitely don’t trust any male who says he is not). I don’t like men as such, which makes my relationship with myself a bit difficult. Life, evasion, avoidance. Sex, sexuality, abuse…

Almost drowning, almost falling, almost choking, fevers, car crashes, almost in the London Kings Cross fire, lost in the bush, threatened with violence, nuclear war…

I never could swim through the thick of things!

I couldn’t swim.
I couldn’t breathe in because I didn't breathe out...
Let me show you:

breath in....breath in....breath in… trying to swim… breath in....breath in....breath in…

The El Salvadoran revolutionaries in Cuba were recovering from horrendous injuries. They applauded us as we walked in to meet them, simply because we were taking the time to visit, from Australia…


[can’t speak]

[music stops]

‘Walter and David Talk About Sex, an Avant-garde Play’

‘Hi, I am the Statue of David.’

skipping between forms of research/ writing/ performance. Performative autobiography as fact/ fiction/ presence/ representation, all true and none reduced to the others.

217 I’m not claiming all men are essentially misogynistic, as one friend thought.
218 My experience of individual and social male sexual behaviour and abuse shapes this.
219 The London Kings Cross railway station fire of the late 1980s: I watched trains head there from a nearby station, noticing smoke and wondering why they didn’t stop to pick us up.
220 During an Australia-Cuba Friendship Society work/tour group of some 70 Australians, in Cuba for three weeks in January 1989.
221 Not published.
222 Posters of Michelangelo’s David were confiscated by the NSW Police Vice Squad from the Third World Bookshop in Goulburn St, Sydney, during the period of anti-Vietnam War protests in the late 1960s. A memory of a time in my early teens, when I also bought a small poster from this shop of Santa Claus saying ‘Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh’.
‘And I am Walter’s six-foot white rabbit Harvey.’\footnote{223}
‘Some things need to be rescued from the present.’\footnote{224}
‘The constellation shines over the abyss.’\footnote{225}
‘O Woman!’
‘O Man!’
‘Ich liebe dich!’\footnote{226}
‘Horrible awful impecunious artifice, Honorificabilitudinitatibus’\footnote{227}

[step down]

And at tonight’s poetry reading, we have a brand new 17 year old poet, reading his first ever publication, a poem in unrhymed trochaic pentameter.

[put on glasses]

The Poet, by Walter Benjamin.

Around the throne of Zeus were gathered
The Olympians. And Apollo spoke,
His gaze turned on Zeus, questioning:
‘In your vast creation, great Zeus,
I can discern each individual being
And tell each from the others at a glance.
Only the poet I seek in vain.’
Whereupon the ruler answered him:
‘Look below on the cliffs of life, the steep – ’\footnote{228}

[take off glasses]

I wrote teenage poetry too. I still do. Here’s one I wrote a little while ago:

[Wind Track – mp4\footnote{229}]

[stand on Chest]

\footnote{223}{An imaginary friend in the eponymously titled movie with James Stewart. I think I mixed it up with James Thurber’s Walter Mitty, and the Danny Kay movie of that.}
\footnote{224}{I’m not sure where this comes from, apart from out of my brain. I think it’s a distortion of a phrase, possibly from Benjamin.}
\footnote{225}{Poetic, a la Benjamin’s use of language.}
\footnote{226}{Thinking of the over-heated examples of German Expressionism in the 1920s.}
\footnote{227}{The poor actor confuses his Macbeth lines, but remembers a famous long word from W Shakespeare, Love’s Labour’s Lost, Methuen & Co, London, 1968, Act V, Scene I, lines 39-40, pp. 116-117. Baconians (anti-Stratfordian Shakespeareans) claimed that ‘honorificabilitudinitatibus’ had not occurred before Shakespeare’s writing, and that Francis Bacon had created it because it is an anagram for a Latin translation of ‘I, F Bacon, wrote this play’. However, it has been found in earlier sources. From memory.}
\footnote{228}{W Benjamin, Early Writings op. cit., pp. 14-15.}
\footnote{229}{Wind sound recorded on my iPhone on a stormy day, Melbourne, Jan 2012.}
the other day I was standing alone at the centre of the universe
pondering karma, cause and effect, teleology, reincarnation, linearity, determinism
and their concomitant stars of chaos, contingency, accident, and choice
when the little man inside my head pulled a lever and said
'this is where the train to nowhere stops, it's time to get out, have a stroll around, look
at actually existing life, make plans'

and at that instant more than six billion people began clamouring
scrambling over six upon six upon six million bodies lying at the heart of possibility
their blank eyes staring and their arms all pointing towards rome
travellers on the road to destiny defiled by the frozen moments of history

'wake up!' he cried, 'this waking dream centres your universe, not you!
the singer's lament is for more than six million of every time and culture, diasporas of
all kinds of minds!'
and then the little man inside my head pushed back the lever and disappeared into the
shift of worlds

i was standing naked on the stone marker at the top of Mount Kosciuszko
watching the stars fade into a purple dawn, shivering

[step down, sing]

O green isle of Erin that waits for me ever
Though fate may decree it forever be far
In exile and lonely, where e’er I may wander
The green –

John McCormack: the Irish nostalgia market in the early 20th century… there’s Irish on
my mother’s side, but that’s another autobiography…

Songs, journals, my political journey, the Philippines…

‘I have the right not to know about something I don’t want to know about’ – old family
saying… but evasion costs me intention, choice, agency, work, ambition, career,
political action, passion, pleasure, simply being able to feel alive…

struggle struggle wander
aimless, unable
(enable, disable)
I seem distant from noise and feeling…

Here’s a question:

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230 From my journal.
231 Bingham and Roeckel, Green Isle of Erin, John McCormack – tenor, Orch. Cond. By Lawrence Collingwood, acoustic 78 rpm recording, HMV/ The Gramophone Co. Ltd, D.B.2848 (Matrix # 2EA 2748). I transcribed and learnt the song from this recording years ago.
232 From an historical point of view my mother’s side of the family is perhaps more interesting than my father’s: but I’m not ready to step into that river.
233 Note: ‘evasion’ is this entire work’s key word.
How much self-help can one person help themselves to?

So:

How many self-served heaped helpings of self-help can self-serving self-help health servers serve so as to save the souls of sad and sorry self-helpers sighing so susceptibly in historically humungous hopeless heaps?\textsuperscript{234}

There's a sub-genre typified by titles like: \textit{Stop Improving Yourself and Start Living}.\textsuperscript{235}

I have 9 or 10 shelves of books I think of as self-help, including the Zen ones – maybe 400 books.

I have five books on how to de-clutter my life.\textsuperscript{236}

I'm a performative performer. I re-make myself every day with reading, especially re-reading genre fiction, desperate for strong narratives.\textsuperscript{237} Why don't I invent myself by writing, I wonder? Why should I leave it to others to throw me into the dustbin of history?\textsuperscript{238}

By the bye, talking of self-help, looking around the planet, just who are helping themselves, and what are they helping themselves to?\textsuperscript{239}

\textit{[From chest get typewriter, and stool, sit on stool, typewriter on knees, furiously tap keys, fast and lightly]}


\textit{[quick pause and glance]}

\textsuperscript{234} Imitation of an actor’s tongue-twister.

\textsuperscript{235} RJ Bryant, \textit{Stop Improving Yourself and Start Living}, New World Library, San Rafael, 1991.

\textsuperscript{236} I can only find three of them, and have discovered that two are by the same author and are largely the same book: D Aslett, \textit{Clutter’s Last Stand: It’s Time To De-Junk Your Life!}, Writer’s Digest Books, Cincinnati, 1984, and \textit{Clutter Be Gone! Cleaning Your House the Easy Way}, Better Way Books, Cincinnati, 1991; and L Oliver, \textit{Sorted! The Ultimate Guide to Organising Your Life}, Hardie Grant Books, Melbourne, 2007. On the other hand, I also have Mirka Mora’s beautifully presented book which thoughtfully discusses the complexity and beauty of clutter: M Mora, \textit{Love and Clutter}, Viking /Penguin, Camberwell, 2003.

\textsuperscript{237} In the last year I’ve re-read genre fiction writers Patrick O’Brian, Georgette Heyer, Antonia Forest, Elizabeth McMaster Bujold, Elfrida Vipont, Elizabeth Moon, and Dick Francis.

\textsuperscript{238} 'Did Trotsky actually invent this phrase, or just like using it? From memory.

\textsuperscript{239} And so: this question means this is ‘political theatre’. It reminds me of Hauptmann/Weill/Brecht/whoever’s \textit{Happy End}, where the overt political content exists in one great line: ‘What’s the crime of robbing a bank, compared to that of owning one?’ From memory: I was in a production of it in 1997, playing an outrageously accented Dr Nakamura.

\textsuperscript{240} Originally I used my grandfather’s typewriter, a green and burgundy Royal Portable, but the leather handle broke, so I used a cleverly slim, grey Czech typewriter that belonged to my father.
SECURITY RISKS IN COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND INSTRUMENTALITIES. AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING COMMISSION: ADAMSON, Roderick

Item 41. As will be seen, Subject has had long and active association with Communism - particularly with propaganda films - here and in Czechoslovakia. If he retains the appointment with the A.B.C., it is to be expected that he will seek to give effect to his own ideas when cutting and otherwise preparing films for T.V. broadcast, and will endeavour to introduce subtle propaganda films from Communist sources.

REGIONAL DIRECTOR, N.S.W.

That ASIO report was about my father. 241 There were ASIO reports about my grandfather too (I didn’t find separate ones for my grandmother). 242 My poet grandfather, Bartlett Adamson, born 8 years before Walter Benjamin, joined the Communist Party after my father did, and died of a heart attack in 1951, while giving a speech at the Sydney Domain in praise of the Soviet Union, ‘the land of his dreams’ – so Miles Franklin described his death. 243

This is my grandfather Bartlett’s old sea-chest… 244

Benjamin and Brecht both loved the materiality and embodied history of objects… 245

[Australian Birds Track 1246]

[get archive of Bartlett books/papers, put on Chinese gown, sit on chest, look through them]

G.E.B. Adamson Zeehan Tas 1907. My grandfather carried this book of Keats poetry around in his pocket, on bushwalks, and kept it close all his life. 247


244 My mother thought it was my father’s, but the typewriter and the chest both bear sea travel stickers (Orient Line), and I’m reasonably certain it was originally his father’s.


My grandfather Bartlett Adamson. The 1880s. "During my early years I lived on a tin mine in the extreme north east of Tasmania. The population of the locality consisted of my parents, two or three other white men, rather irresponsible, and 50 or 60 Chinese fossickers .... Whenever my father had to be absent in Ringarooma, generally a two day trip, he would ask the leader of the Chinese, Ah Quong, to keep an eye out for strangers ... Ah Quong was not employed by my father. There was no need for this faithful guardianship, but there he was, an average Chinese working man, quietly courteous, honest, and dependable.""249

[get Mystery Gold, pamphlet from 78 cabinet, show audience]


"The curve of an arm was about my throat, and bony fingers clawed and gripped my hands ... There were at least three Chinamen behind me, and a fourth was coming at me in front. I kicked him in the stomach ... I got my neck and one hand free ... Swinging round like a wild thing, I landed a blow with the free hand between the eyes of one of the Chinks. He staggered. What happened next is a blurred picture in my memory. From a corner of one eye I glimpsed two or three natives running away...."250

[read from flyleaf]

I gave a copy of *Mystery Gold* to my 8 year-old son:

'To Rodric from Dad — Bartlett Adamson, Sydney, Sept 1931'251

[hold up pamphlet]

1945: I published this poem: *Relativity*

*So long as one least coolie lies
And in an Asian gutter dies,
There cannot be, beneath the sun,
Security for anyone.*252

[hold up pamphlet in raised fist pose]

And this: *Strike For Indonesian Freedom*

___

248 George Ernest Bartlett Adamson, usually known as Bartlett Adamson in print, Bart in conversation, and also as GEB, and various journalist bylines. Bartlett was his mother’s maiden name.
251 Rodric Adamson, the middle of three brothers, my father.
Yet once more, my fellow-workers! Yet once more you lead the van, 
Armed with all unselfish motives, fighting for your fellowman. 
Never was a worthier struggle than this Indonesian cause, 
Never gentler people suffered under more degrading laws.

Just as diggers at Eureka fought an iron tyranny, 
So these Indonesian patriots fight for freedom yet to be. 
So you, workers of Australia! born of that Eureka breed, 
Truly stand by these, your brothers, fight their fight in word and deed.²⁵³

[Birds record off]

I will now sing for you Light of My Days, a Song, words by Bartlett Adamson, Music by Ethel A. Brady. I wrote this in 1914:

The night is peace, and a silvery splendour, 
Is on the wide sea and along the warm shore, 
And Love! O must, O must I surrender, 
My life to the darkness forever more, 
O Love, O Light of my night and my day! 
O stay not forever away, away – 
O stay not forever, stay not forever, 
Stay not forever, away, away – 
Away!²⁵⁴

[riffle through pages]

In 1932 I published These Beautiful Women, my poems describing works of art:

Three things of grace and beauteousness 
Bewildering-bright there be: 
A racehorse; and a dazzling press 
Of sails along the sea; 
And woman, from distorting dress 
Set luminously free.²⁵⁵

and in 1942, I produced a hundred cyclostyled copies, for ‘record and copyright-protection purposes’ only, of Beyond the Sun, 18 pages long – my colleague Jean Devanny thought it the best poetry I ever wrote:²⁵⁶

²⁵³ ibid., p. 17.
²⁵⁵ B Adamson, decorations by R Hodgkinson, These Beautiful Women, Sydneysider Company, Sydney, no date (1932 listed in the National Archives of Australia). Poems accompanying artistic nudes. From the dedication: ‘These paintings have all achieved the highest artistic distinction the world has to offer – exhibition at the Paris Salon – and it is to the artists who painted them that this volume, in profound admiration, is dedicated. The quoted poem is printed opposite the title page.
Warm around the waist of him who did thus woo her
Wandered her arms and fondly held him to her
His cock, impatient, bursting for the bliss,
Pressed at her unresistant clitoris,
Parted her quivering lips of love, and now,
Thunders of love pulsating in his brow,
He felt her rise to him, her wet cunt sucking
Greedy to take this man-thing throbbing, bucking,
While to the mid most of that magic grove,
Thrusting the gateway wide, strongly he drove.

I wonder if Jean liked these lines, I’m still not sure about them:

She sighed: ‘Can any love else be blended
Of mood so tender and cock so splendid.
What ways of love might he not yet instruct me!
None other man so maddeningly has fucked me.’

[look confused; take off Chinese gown]

This robe was given to me by my brother and sister-in-law after a trip to China a few years ago…

[put down robe; move DSL]

I am standing on the edge of a cliff, a Blue Mountains cliff, a remembered cliff, a non-cliff, a zen cliff? a blind Gloucester cliff, an opium cliff, a drug psychosis cliff, a childhood cliff, a post-traumatic cliff/ The Gap cliff, a bridge cliff, a Gertrude Stein cliff, a self-consciously clever James Joyce cliff, a Blue Cliff Record Hekiganroku cliff/ a cleft cliff, a falling cliff, a rock bottom cliff, a cliff for all seasons cliff, a here we are at the end of all things Sam cliff? a nuclear nightmare cliff, a comet collision cliff, a boiling seas cliff, a monopoly media cliff, a film cliff/ a cliff around the ear, the eye, the taste, smell, touch cliff, a nothing, a gone before, gone ahead, throw my heart over cliff, a throw the hats high and climb over the high wall cliff, a climb the mountain fingerhold by fingerhold up to the stars cliff, a can’t get over it under it around it through it can’t do it cliff

[get coffeepot from 78 cabinet and play, ie, sing Pink Panther]

literature, ‘a long, extremely erotic poem’; and quotes the first excerpt here from p. 10 of Beyond the Sun (see next footnote). This is where I first became aware of the poem’s existence.

257 B Adamson, Beyond the Sun, Copied for Record Purposes Only by the Author, ‘Woorookoo’, Arcadia, NSW, Australia, 1942. I have a photocopy of cyclostyled copy No. 100; signed by the author. Quotations from pp. 6 and 10. The poem is 18 typewritten pages long, and is all in the same vein.

258 Many references here, as I wrote in the stream of consciousness beloved of modernists or in a single breath like a Beat poet: childhood, Zen, King Lear, a suicide spot in Sydney, modernists, more Zen, Lord of the Rings, Dragonflight, the Heart Sutra, The West Wing, my own struggles, wordplay, and ‘Rock My Soul In the Bosom of Abraham’.

259 From the repertoire of the Teapot Ensemble of Australia, of which I was a founding member in 2004: Henry Mancini’s ‘Pink Panther’ theme, sung into a china coffeepot.
The ASIO documents voice suspicions that my father Rodric ‘was believed to be attending a course in International Espionage at Warsaw,’ and further, that: ‘He is no doubt a capable photographer.’ My father didn’t talk about his activity in the Communist Party, which he left in 1957. He burnt all his papers and documents about it. But he did once say that if he'd known his children would grow up to be Trotskyists he would have drowned them at birth. That’s what I thought he said, but he actually said he would have shot himself.

Byelo mi v’boi podyom
Na vlast sovietov
I kak adjin umrom
V’borbye za eto

Hmm. David, at this audition at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in 1982 we don't believe we're hearing your own voice... do you have another song prepared?

Then Father Murphy, from old Kilcormack,
Spurred up the hill, with a rousing cry
Arm! Arm! My lads, for I've come to lead you!
For Ireland's freedom, we fight or die!

Umm, David, do you have something else for us today?

Je sens un desespoir
Dans l'horreur qui est extreme
Je ne dois plus voir ce que j'aime
Je ne veux plus souffrir le jour

Ok, you're in! But you’ll have to discover your real voice.

I saw a Chinese film once, and there was a man singing with a resonance something like this:

[sing high, loud, falsetto resonance]

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261 From family conversations recalled.

262 Learnt in the early 1980s from an LP recording, Songs of the Russian Civil War, possibly issued by Folkways. I have written the transliterated words of this chorus inaccurately from memory, and recall that they might translate as: ‘Come, let us fight and die for the land of the Soviets!’

263 I was auditioning to have private lessons with the singer Grant Dickson.

264 The first chorus of the Irish Republican folksong ‘Boulavogue’, which was the first song I can ever remember choosing to learn all the words of, in my early teens, from a Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem LP recording.

265 Chorus of ‘Bois Epais’ by Jean-Baptiste Lully, in S Northcote (ed.), Bass Songs: The New Imperial Edition, Boosey & Hawkes, London, 1949, pp. 10-11. This was one of the first songs I learnt with a classical singing teacher, when I was 18. I think of the meaning inaccurately as: I feel despair/ In extreme horror/ I must no longer see her whom I love/ I no longer wish to suffer the (light of) day.

266 On television. Set in a remote mountainous region. I have no idea what film it was.
Paul Robeson, famous Afro-American singer, accused of being a communist.268 I recall my father Rodric saying with pride that he ‘shook hands with Paul Robeson in Prague in 1948.’ My father Rod went to Eastern Europe as a Communist delegate from the Eureka Youth League to the first International Festival of Youth and Students. The Graeme Bell jazz band was on the ship too, and also feature as pinko commies in the ASIO reports.269

This is a memento from that festival.270 I sang as one of Tevye’s daughters in primary school, scarf, broom, and my mother’s Bulgarian peasant skirt: Matchmaker, matchmaker make me a match, find me a find, catch me a catch...271

My father hardly mentioned his military experience, even though he was in the Australian Army from 1941 to 1946, with some 80 days on Morotai, a major US staging post for taking Mindanao.272 I recall him saying this: the US soldiers would make lots of noise on patrol, and justify this by saying: ‘The enemy hear us coming, and get out of our way.’ That attitude explains the Vietnam War...

My father didn’t talk at all about his childhood. Born in Bondi,273 he grew up at Arcadia, outside Sydney, in an area of orchards. Bartlet his father organized the fruit growers there into a cooperative in the 1920s,274 built a sandstone house out of local stone on the block, and later hid the Tribune printing presses there, when Menzies tried to ban the Communist Party.275 But I don't quite know how I know all this — not from

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269 Copied from: ASIO and predecessors, ‘Adamson, Rodric Tolmie’, Item 2081, Series A6119, op. cit.; Graeme Bell and the other band members are listed with my father on the document numbered ‘12’.
270 A head scarf that bears the words: ‘World University Summer Games 1949’, in four languages: Hungarian, Russian, French and English.
271 From the musical Fiddler On the Roof. I saw this with Tevye performed by Hayes Gordon. I studied with him years later (in 1978) at the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney, where he accused me of being an intellectual, and agreed to differ.
272 Adamson, Rodric Tolmie, Army No. NX168825, National Archives of Australia.
275 There were three houses in the history of the Arcadia block, and although it is family history that the presses were hidden there briefly, I don’t know precisely where or for how long.
him, or not directly. Family biography is this dense texture of stories and questions and half-truths, filtered through the confusions of childhood. Arcadia… haunts me.

[Explain Breugel painting]

Breugel’s Children’s Games. Art scholars have counted up to 82, with many modern equivalents. But the children seem to be adults playing. Brecht enjoyed Breugel’s effects, groupings, contradictions…

[put on Rod’s tweed jacket276]

Growing up in the early 1960s, I thought all birds would disappear, all trees would die.277 When I was young, my father would go to bed for days, with asthma; or was it depression? Or both? We had to be very quiet. He was very good at building stone walls. He taught me to cut bread straight, how to drive a car with a certain Sydney flair. This was his coat, Harris Tweed; I remember the roughness and the smell of whisky. I wore it for a while after he died, a bit small, falling apart. He moved out when I was 14. Secrets. His secrets. Our house. My secrets.

I don’t like being looked at…278

[put tea-chest over head]

Don’t put me in a box!279

[put down tea-chest]

Hang on, did I just say I don’t like being looked at? Performance as a defence…montage to break up sense and open up meaning… I don’t want it to make sense… I don’t want to have an effect on the audience…280 What?

We all have secrets.

[can’t speak]

[put on hat, hold coat in hands, get 2 papers from small tansu locked drawer]

There’s a little wooden slide that locks this drawer…

Walter Benjamin had secrets.281

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276 The coat I remember Rod wearing when I was young.

277 This is a very vivid memory that I associate with bellbirds, on a particular hairpin bend of what may have been the Bulli Pass, in NSW.

278 This is true: I much prefer the risk-taking space of rehearsal to that of performance, and I know other actors who are similar.

279 Tea-chests are increasingly hard to find. Mine are from roadside hard rubbish, collected years ago for performances of the Teapot Ensemble of Australia, are marked with dates from the 1980s.

280 From the journal.
‘Dear little child, I beg of you/ Pray for the little hunchback too.’

‘At any rate, there could be no doubt that an idea (unfortunately, an illusory idea) of repudiating my mother, those like her, and the social class to which we both belonged, was at the bottom of that unparalleled excitement which drove me to accost a whore in the street. It could take hours before I made my move. The horror I felt in doing so was no different from that which would have filled me in the presence of an automaton requiring merely a question to be set in motion. And so I cast my voice into the slot. The blood was singing in my ears at that point, and I could not catch the words that fell from the thickly painted lips. I fled the scene. But how many times that night did I repeat the mad routine? When I finally came to a halt beneath an entrance-way, sometimes practically at dawn, I had hopelessly ensnared myself in the asphalt meshes of the street, and it was not the cleanest of hands that disentangled me.’

[To audience]

Have you ever paid been paid faked been violent been seen abused ashamed let’s talk about sss…

A theatre friend of mine said to me – we were both a bit drunk – ‘Yes, it’s good… but there’s not enough FUCK YOU! in it, there’s not enough FUCK YOU!’

[Back to audience]

FUCK YOU!!

[Shrug, look back over shoulder at audience]

Bertolt Brecht had secrets.

[sit on front of Chest, straight front]

[Interrogator with US accent, Brecht with German accent and wide eyes blinking]

‘Mr Brecht, since you have been in the United States, have you attended any Communist Party meetings?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

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281 The contemporary knowledge and impressions of Walter Benjamin are shaped today by the huge amount of his work now published, in English, that was unpublished in his lifetime, or private, or unworked, or unfinished. The Selected Works, and the Arcades Project, particularly, give an equal form to these various levels of work. See W Benjamin, Selected Writings 1-4, and The Arcades Project, op. cit.

282 W Benjamin, Berlin Childhood around 1900, op. cit., pp. 120-22, from ‘The Little Hunchback’. The childhood theme of mischief and bad luck recurs at various points in Benjamin’s work, and is used by Hannah Arendt in Part 1 of her Introduction to Illuminations, op. cit., pp. 7-24.

283 W Benjamin, Berlin Childhood around 1900, op. cit., pp. 158-160, from the section ‘Beggars and Whores’, excluded from the version of Berlin Childhood published in Benjamin’s lifetime.

284 Salt’n’Pepa, Let’s Talk About Sex, a music hit in the 80s, from memory.
‘You don't think so?’

‘No.’

‘Well, aren't you certain?’

‘No—I am certain, yes.’

‘You are certain you have never been to Communist Party meetings?’

‘Yes, I think so. I am here six years—I am here those—I do not think so. I do not think that I attended political meetings.’

‘No, never mind the political meetings, but have you attended any Communist meetings in the United States?’

‘I do not think so, no.’

‘You are certain?’

‘I think I am certain.’

‘You think you are certain?’

‘Yes, I have not attended such meetings, in my opinion.’

Everywhere I went in Manila, just before the start of this PhD, I sang Brecht songs everywhere, unaccompanied, the only thing I had to give back to incredible generosity everywhere, but that’s another story… When I bought this sack of rice here in Melbourne, $37, and first lifted it, it felt like a baby or a child, a nice thing to hold, heavy. Rice. I met people who were desperately grateful for a sack of rice… I arrived in Manila with the worst headache of my life, groaning and rocking with pain. I left Manila with a headache too, a bad headache. Strangely, it was gone by the time I get to Singapore. Something to do with the pressure…

[drop sack of rice on the books, fall on top of it]

[Requiem, Lennie Tristano, Track 2]

Can I continue with this project, I wonder, my thoughts crushing, and then I think:

285 This reads as comedy, but is taken verbatim from: E Bentley (ed.), Thirty Years of Treason, op. cit., Thames and Hudson, London, 1971, p. 214. Brecht was called there with the people who became known as the Hollywood Ten. 19 people were called, 8 didn’t show, 10 didn’t speak (pleading the 5th Amendment), and so Brecht was the only one who answered the Committee’s questions. This is only one part of the proceedings, but he is similarly precise and evasive throughout. The chair thanks him at the end for being a good example for the witnesses (perhaps because he was the only one who spoke). Brecht left the United States for Paris the next day. See his account of this in B Brecht, Journals 1934-1955, Methuen, London, 1993, entries ‘30 Oct 47’ and ‘31 Oct 47’, p. 372.


287 This entire process I have felt like a square peg in a round hole, or a mountain trying to fit into a molehill, or an infinitesimal speck in a gigantic universe. My struggles with the work also seem to reflect
Going from one mode of madness to another
The effort is taking me out of madness but driving me mad
But this madness is the more appropriate one
Then that means that every mode is mad
Therefore any normality is appropriately mad
The discourses that express them even more so
Given that irony can reverse everything.
In academia, the performative is popular.\textsuperscript{288}
What can theatrical performance bring to the table of all the diners?\textsuperscript{289}
‘We call for an end to the fear of endings!’
‘It wouldn’t be a true struggle if it made sense!’\textsuperscript{290}

‘And your One Minute Topic\textsuperscript{291} is… The Myths of Ancient Greek Drama’

‘Ummm... The 'Ritual' hypothesis is balderdash, disproved as early as 1927 - The origins of Greek tragedy lie in comedy, according to Aristotle - Thespis was attacked by Solon for caricaturing the gods, not for being the first brave individual actor - one tragedy had everyone in the chorus representing each letter of the alphabet - 10 of the extant 32 so-called tragedies have happy endings - Lattimore and others excoriate faulty and misleading translations of terms such as hubris, hamartia, nemesis, etc – Arcadia was the land of (no, let’s not go there) - Platonic ideal forms would be impossible without alphabetic language abstractions - marginalised performers seeking affirmative significance for their craft want the ritual hypothesis to be true...’\textsuperscript{292}

\textsuperscript{288} Since writing this script, \textit{performativity} has become a crucial part of my understanding, despite its over-extended use.
\textsuperscript{289} Echoing a speech of Malcolm X, from memory.
\textsuperscript{290} These last two lines are in quotation marks quoting myself, from the journal.
\textsuperscript{291} This is not simply an undergraduate variety performance cliché, but an echo of the national 3-Minute Thesis competition for PhD candidates that I participated in, Deakin, 2010.
‘Time’s up I’m afraid, and we actually wanted you to recite the index to Robert Graves’ Greek Myths Complete.’ 293

On the head of a pin
On the edge of Ockham’s razor
Jacques Lecoq on the rock
Of the body and balance294

One-legged effort
Two-legged happenstance
Three-legged race
Fall between many stools295
What is the sound of one hand?
Green mountains are walking
Bring me saindhava!296
I wish I were a different mood297

I am an off-balance imbalance
On the balance of improbabilities298

[Music starts: Strauss/Hesse ‘Beim Schlafengehen/ Going to Sleep’, Teresa Stich-Randall299]

Walter Benjamin avoids military service throughout WWI by faking various medical symptoms.300

294 Jacques Lecoq informs much of my theatre experience, although not directly. I participated in a 2-day and then a three-week workshop with Philippe Gaulier in 1995; a first year drama subject I have taught in its more recent years is clearly based on his work. See J Lecoq, The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre, Methuen, London, 2002.
295 I enjoy the word sequence of ‘one two three fall’ greatly.
296 These three lines refer to Hakuin’s famous Zen koan; a fascicle from Dogen’s Shobogenzo; and an older koan. The hand does not clap; the mountains walk and don’t walk; saindhava is the word for four different objects: how does the servant know which one the king means? (my favourite koan).
297 Not tense.
298 A poem from my journal.
299 R Strauss and H Hesse, ‘Beim Schlafengehen/ Going to Sleep,’ from Vier Letzte Lieder/Four last Songs, Teresa Stich-Randall, soprano, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, cond. Ernst Ansermet, RSR Cascavelle VEL 3135, Track 10 (Now that I am wearied of the day, my ardent desire shall friendly receive the starry night like a sleepy child. Hands, stop all your work. Brow, forget all your thinking. All my senses now yeann to sink into slumber. And my unfettered soul wishes to soar up freely into night’s magic sphere to live there deeply and thousandfold).
300 E Leslie, Walter Benjamin, op. cit., pp. 32-33 and 36.
Walter’s best friend, the 19 year old poet Fritz Heinle, commits suicide in August 1914 to protest the war301 (one year before my great uncle Robert Ignatius Sullivan dies in the same month at Lone Pine).302

Walter's favourite aunt suicides in 1916.303

So many suicides and attempts in all our families.304

*put pills and glass of water on Chest, put on coat and spectacles*

I have to go now. This is now. This is the moment. Time has stopped. History is all at this point.305

*hat on chest, sit on ladder steps, pick up typewriter case, put flat on knees. Lay out pills on case, and glass of water*

I was tired. I was so tired. I could not climb this mountain again.306

*swallow pills*

I hope everyone understands. Fritz, Wolf; Alfred, Jula, Dora; Gershom, Teddie, Bertolt; Asja, Elizabeth, Gretel; ... Stefan... those to come...307

*swallow pills, water*

*Put on hat when music reaches final instrumental, sitting stooped, staring out OSL. Music track finishes, lights fade.*

*lights slowly up; take a bow, gesture to Stage Manager, exit*

301 ibid, p.31.
303 From memory: I can’t find the reference, but the play is done and recorded.
304 The ethical aspects of my research apply at this point: I wished to use a beautiful, haunting image of a relative, but it didn’t feel appropriate (to me).
305 I am paraphrasing and over-determining the language here: for philosophical and dramatic reasons. The idea of history in the present is at the heart of my interest in Walter Benjamin. See ‘On the Concept of History’, op. cit., pp. 389-411.
307 G Scholem, Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship, op. cit., pp. 280-283. The mood of this scene correlates with the end of Scholem’s book, including Henny Gurland’s account of Walter Benjamin’s final night in Port Bou.
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