I undertook my Master of Dramatic Art (Direction) at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, successfully completing with First Class Honours in 2000, creating a theatrical production, *Alice Arden*, and an exegesis. My original Research Topic was:

To discover, develop, document and reflect upon a directing methodology and rehearsal process suitable for producing a performance of two seventeenth century texts for a contemporary audience: *Arden of Faversham* (Anonymous; 1592; English), and *The Surgeon of Honour* by Pedro Calderon de la Barca (1611; Spanish). The primary focus will be upon the elements of these texts that are problematic for a late twentieth century sensibility, in particular the representation of women. As such, the final research performance will not seek to create definitive performances of the entire texts, but rather a new text developed from the originals in response to the specific focuses of the research.

Why was I, an Australian director, interested in *Arden of Faversham*? The word ‘domestic’ first caught my attention in the title of the copy of collected plays I bought, *Three Elizabethan Domestic Tragedies* (1985). I wondered what would make them domestic? Would this imply an Elizabethan kitchen sink drama? When I read them, they were all about murder, that great domestic activity. But if I looked deeper, this was truly domestic: husbands, wives and children murdered by family members, and not a prince in sight. *Arden of Faversham* was the first play in the book, and it seemed so vivid in the face of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and *A Woman Killed With Kindness*, the first of which is a short teaching play about a bad man who murders the children of his good wife, and the second of which is focussed on the damage done by adultery to a good woman’s reputation, which ends with her starving herself to death as penance.

There were a few reasons for my interest: first, I think I couldn’t resist the playwright’s desire to let Alice speak for herself, and to show her in action; second, I have family links to Kent, and third, the Elizabethan world has been fascinating to me since childhood. I have since discovered that this text was directed by the great female directors, Buzz Goodbody and Joan Littlewood, and written about by Antonin Artaud. My developing interest in Spanish theatre was sparked by seeing a performance of a Lope de Vega play, and after creating some workshops for actors on the Calderon material, I wanted to know more. In my own mind the two plays were linked by their cruelty, which was similar but inverted through their different cultures. Eventually, I was forced to acknowledge that two plays would make the process very unwieldy and complex, and so I dropped the Spanish play.
Directors are researchers by nature, moving between dreaming up productions, or proposals, and action research, which we refer to as rehearsals. In essence I wanted to do some action research on myself as director; I wanted to understand my own drives and aesthetics when working with material which was personal and pertinent to me, and I wanted to deeply investigate with a team of actors as co-collaborators rather than as performers for hire. I concluded that the academic arena would provide me with the right stimulus of support and challenge, and that the requirement for an outcome would shape the venture. In 1998 and beyond, important ingredients for the success of this Masters programme which could record and produce results included: a scholarship; a great supervisor who was enthusiastic about the project; key collaborators; space; time; a quiet work environment; the adoption of ground rules within the work; stages of experimentation; and recording of results.

Since I have always taught into this institution as a practitioner, I did not come to the experience with previous knowledge of academic structures. Aspects of my candidature that therefore became problematic included a lack of information about what a Masters is; vague academic advice provided by people not in my field; lack of funding to release actors’ time; lack of physical resources; personal interruptions; and a lack of access to precedents.

Having invited a large number of actors to work with me in a series of exploratory workshops and showings of key scenes from the two plays, I commenced explorations into the text and the language. At the beginning I was less interested in the full story and the range of characters, and more focussed on representing and dissecting stage approaches to the key men and women. I went in blind, aware that I wished to examine textual material through a number of lenses, and lay down the kind of time that a commercially based rehearsal process cannot provide. However I had no compass to guide me through the maze of my own interests, and found the prompting of my supervisor crucial in helping me create a foundation for the paths to follow, including stages such as:

- **Research in Reading:** by investigating the period, previous writings on the plays, past productions, books on female directors, visual perception, gender in acting and feminism in theatre;
- **Research in Writing:** both reporting my methodology and writing poetically in briefer, meditation-like passages;
- **Research in Rehearsal Methodology:** using up to 20 actors on rotation, inventing, stretching and discarding rehearsal exercises such as impulse work, spatial games, gender swaps and image building from the text, and recording these through writing, audio, video and rehearsal;
- **Presentation to Invited Audiences:** short ten-minute sequences of interpretive approaches where I explored gender reversals, multiperepresentations or repetitions of key scenes;
- **Surveys:** for the audiences, in the form of tick-the-box and free writing about responses to what they had seen; and
- **Visual Images:** study and replication of paintings of the Elizabethan period in particular.

I commenced with high hopes and was very focussed on my own journey. What I had not factored in was that I would be studying alongside post grad directors, and that their views would have an impact on mine. My conceptual frame was quickly altered by a telling experience, which I reported in the exegesis:

“For about a year, I had been wrestling with the realisation that not everyone loves the classics with the same whole-hearted passion as me, not only that, but that some people have an active antipathy for anything historical. In March 1998, I was invited to give a presentation to my fellow students on the Masters. I chose to create a climate of language in
a small room, asking my actors to simultaneously recite speeches from the two plays whilst standing on chairs, surrounded by Elizabethan portraits, and then to give cold readings of a few scenes to illustrate the area of my interest. There was support, interest and discussion, but, to my dismay, one student announced her disdain for the material, explaining that it made her want to stick her fingers in her ears. She went on to criticise one actor for his English-sounding delivery (he was a New Zealander), and to list the cultural associations that his sound set off in her about pomposity, empire and distance. There was a free and fast debate at this point, during which I remember trying to reduce the atmosphere of criticism. People asked me why I connect with these texts. The dissenting view was not universally supported: someone said ‘It is what it is. The ear attunes’, and ‘the rhythm is produced by the language style.’ We discussed whether there is an Australian ‘sound’. Everyone expressed a desire to see my production” (20).

I know now that I was trying to unlock some questions about perception—what do I see when I look at the rehearsal room floor, and how does this shape my aesthetic, and the forms I offer the audience? What do others see? When they don’t ‘see’ what I ‘see’ am I wrong? I was also haunted by my training, which had encouraged me to focus on quite deep explorations away from the text, yet seemed to demand I drop this focus once production decisions needed to be made, and my work became more ‘practical’. Somehow I wished to resolve this tension.

What follows here are some excerpts from my final exegesis, which indicate some of the turning points in the process I undertook. There were key artistic decisions I made that began to shape what was kept and what was discarded.

**Multiple Characterisations Create an approach to the World**

“My use of multiples began with ghosting, a process where one actor whispers the lines to another, who plays them out loud. I had denoted the actors major and minor, yet found that the associated images I perceived were constructed as a result of viewing all the figures in the space simultaneously. I began to reduce my instructions, so that any actor could walk in and do any work with any other actor. The serial anonymity of this appealed to me, and linked to my query of character and identity.

“One day an actor asked me whether my need to see many women play Alice was an acknowledgment that, due to her weakness, we needed an army of her to make her convincing. This startled me, because I think the germ of my response is a desire to see the complexity of female strength represented. Alice is not an ideal subject, she’s a vain, capricious and wilful murderess, but she is not weak. She has many words, but remains silent about her inner experience. I recognise that my obsession with the silent woman is about wanting to articulate what fills her silence, and what keeps her wordless at key moments. At the end of the play, I was confused about the way Franklin leaves Alice out of his epilogue. Despite some worthy attempts to provide Alice with an epi-epilogue, it felt like the story was over and everything had been said. Our construction of a song, an image of prayer and destruction of flowers was better able to articulate my grief about what is unresolved in the way Alice’s story is told. Silence has its power” (26).

**Gender Experiments**

“It seems now that when I started I was really haunted by identity: both the characters’, and my own as a director in relation to them. Multiple representations of characters and cross-gender casting of the characters of Alice and Mosby struck me as a radical way to
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re-write the text, a deliberate disobedience which would allow me to write in space what I perceived about the play. As I have gained experience as a director, I have begun to question the idea of ‘character’. Many older actors I know state that there is no such thing as character, just the actor assuming a false identity. My reading of feminist theory about contemporary theatre, especially the work of Sue-Ellen Case, had helped me to clarify my opinion that the theatre provides a crucible for experiments. The ways women have been represented and perceived onstage have shifted with the development of feminism, allowing for the concept of a feminist poetics which refutes the existence of the female figure as a sign of the male gaze, and instead posits the use of woman as subject instead of object. I thought that perhaps the concept of character could be a jumping off point for some experiments with representation. I was more invested in planting the values which interested me within the beauties of the text itself, and finding metaphors and symbols which would signify my ideas in space. Maybe, as Elizabeth Schafer has posited, the “MsDirection of women is not a mistake, but a deliberate and liberating shift in perspective?” (Schafer 1999, 15).

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In taking up my study to complete a Master of Dramatic Art, the mission I set myself was to reveal Alice Arden, the leading character in *Arden of Faversham*, the way she saw herself, the way other characters saw her, and the way I saw her.

Don’t I always do that? I have produced many productions before that cross the t’s and dot the i’s, whilst scrupulously avoiding the kind of interpretation which rewrites the text. I began to dream, remembering about a Peter Stein production of *As You Like It*, where the research took eighteen months and caused a work of theatre of its own. It has often disappointed me to saturate myself in sources, only to see them dwindle into footnotes in the programme by the time the show is on.

Actors volunteered to work with me. They became my ghost ensemble, and I wanted lots and lots of them. In scheduling 20 volunteer actors into a profit share, it is possible to rehearse on Friday nights after work and Saturday mornings before the market. Nevertheless, I reached a point of deep depression when I realised that my artistic ambitions were predicated on the idea of ensemble, a focussed group of like-minded individuals who could build the work, and that my ensemble did not really exist, was a phantom. I doubt that all members were ever present together . . . in the face of modern living, I could only hold the husk of this seed—and then I had a breakthrough:

**Beads on a Necklace**

“In discussion with my supervisor, I referred to the work that had been made as the beads on a necklace, that any session with any actor might create a pearl, which could then be passed on or ‘inherited’ by another player who took their place. The necklace theory of rehearsal seemed fraught with haphazard dangers until I accepted the obvious: that if I was committed to multiple interpretations, the work belonged to no-one, yet was held in common. This is really exciting. It has shaken up my understanding of the conventions of rehearsal, and forced me to re-imagine the acceptable boundaries of directorial authority. For the actors, they report that fear and anxiety has given way to flexibility and non-possessive collaboration.

“A production never emerges for me as a complete entity in embryo. Even under optimum conditions the preparation which brings the play to life on the floor is merely a kind of compost which, as it improves, transforms, and evaporates. In the case of Alice Arden, the nature of the work was deeply affected by what I have termed necklace theory, which emerges for me as a new philosophy about the making of contemporary theatre. The old dream of late-nineteenth and twentieth century actors, to form a company and retreat to a mythically resonant location, in order to work in depth, has been smashed by economic rationalism. Instead, the notion of making theatre art by building tiny pieces scattered amongst actors and director, like beads on the floor until they are strung, offers a potential guerilla action for artists who wish to collaborate over time. What this has created in me is an increased capacity to withstand random interruption during rehearsal, a stronger and more determined ability to record or pin down the fragments, and a new interest in releasing myself from the pressure to create a work which is consistent” (28).

In staging the work I used a number of interventions which allowed me to view the responses of the test audience as part of the experience, and which overtly acknowledged my place in the proceedings. I created an audience area on three sides and had the actors sit at the back of the fourth, so that we were enclosed. I then divided the audience area by gender into one place for men and another for women and asked each gender to sit in their allotted area. The production staged the bare bones of the plot and focussed on the characters of Alice, Arden, Franklin, and Mosby. I gave a video camera
to Franklin and instructed him/the actor to stop the action if he felt that other characters were lying, and to interrogate them on-camera about their actions. This was then projected onto a screen behind the stage. Scenes were repeated in different gender combinations simultaneously. 'Alice' split into five versions when under emotional pressure. Genre and acting style changed from Elizabethan to Film Noir to suburban grunge. I announced my presence as director in the audience every night at the commencement of the performance, and my status as the researcher allowed me to walk up to people with specific questions, and write down their answers—which means I am very sure of the response. I even had a directorial argument with one of the Alices during a performance. These devices were liberating for me, and made the auditorium dynamic. At the end, Franklin turned to the male section of audience and addressed them as “Gentlemen”, ignoring the women in the audience completely.

The highly positive response to the production of *Alice Arden* surprised me, since I was expecting many people to be confused or unable to travel with the piece as it unfolded. Also, after two years I felt sure about what should be contained within the piece, but confused and doubtful about how it would be read by a new audience. I literally couldn’t imagine how it would be seen by people who knew nothing about the project. So I was delighted to discover that most people I talked to were excited, stimulated and intrigued by the production; they understood what they saw, and were engaged and intrigued by the frequent shifts of style.

“What has it meant to consider my work as a female director? It has been important to trace the trajectory of my responses . . . my adoption of the term ‘meditation’, with its spiritual resonances, was deliberate. Like any form of prayer, the practice of sitting quietly in the empty space in order to contemplate meaning has provided connection, confrontation and comfort. The empty space involved in this situation has been the theatre. I have meditated often upon the Elizabethan open stage, that piece of daylight with a fence around it. As a woman of the twenty-first century, I am admitted to the inner sanctum, the place where the machinery and frippery is stored, in order to rummage and to play. Alice herself could only stand at the gate of the auditorium. It is this gap in our experience which has so troubled and stirred me. I have acknowledged and explored the fact that that my gaze is female. When I name this truth it loses mystique and gains a shape, which can then be used in my work” (40).

My view of myself as a director has altered, because my aesthetic has been affirmed by the experience of staging my deepest impulses. There is a query for me now about my previous commercially-based directing work, and whether I have suppressed past ideas, but I recognise that this research period has given me clear territory beyond the pressure of the marketplace, which can tend to limit experimentation. Adopting Necklace Theory as an approach to my own work has allowed me to collect ideas with a sense of implicit structure behind them, even when there is no apparent outcome. It has also allowed me to continue a kind of artistic dialectic with myself which is not dependent on external review.

At a distance of five years, it is interesting to consider the outcomes of my research and the impact of the project on my practice. I feel extremely satisfied that *Alice Arden* expanded my understanding of the director’s position in the creation of images and messages onstage, and that it allowed all of my obsessions room to breathe and communicate. I have continued to experiment with gender swaps and multiple characters, and am more confident to stage the action based on my own responses to the kinaesthetic wanderings of the actors, rather than settling into patterns of repetition. I remain excited about that play and the project, haven’t finished with it. I chopped it up and only digested the bits that interested me, then re-authored the connections between the pieces that were missing and staged it all, both my thinking and the text itself. I know I think like this—my supervisor once showed me a picture
of the brain at work during a creative act from Jonathan Miller’s *Subsequent Performances* and that strange explosive scribble looked just like the inner map of how I construct! It has been fantastic to hear from those who saw the production that they viewed it as a master work which should be re-launched at a festival—haven’t found the resources yet, but Necklace Theory implies that I will.

Endnote
1. In terms of performance research, I believe that I made some genuine explorations into acting styles and their development from demonstrative to psychological. Placing the female into the arena of a text and a theatre once exclusively male is still radical, and for me the transfer of cultural values from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century can never be automatic and remains unstable in a delicious way.

References

Miller, Jonathan 1988 *Subsequent Performances* London: Faber and Faber.


Kim Durban initially trained as a teacher, then as a director at the Victorian College of the Arts. Her productions of classic texts include *The White Devil* and *Alice Arden* (V.C.A.), *The Comedy of Errors* (Zootango), *The Recruiting Officer* (Melbourne Theatre Company), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (St. Martin’s), *As You Like It* (National Theatre and Drama School), and *Richard III, All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Twelfth Night* at the Arts Academy, where she is currently Course Coordinator of Degrees in Acting and Music Theatre.