

# Singing the blues: developing a cabaret performance on depression

## Abstract

This paper will discuss the researcher's practice-led study within the field of contemporary cabaret performance. The project is focussed on transforming personal stories of depression into cabaret with the aims of raising community awareness of the issue. In the process, the research aims to explore innovations within the field of cabaret. Interviews conducted with individuals who have suffered from depression are being used as 'inspiration points' for the development of the performance. This paper will provide a short contextual review for the project and introduce the researcher's creative process.

For the purposes of this research, cabaret has been defined as performances of songs and dialogue in direct-address with the audience. Cabaret performances merge 'high' and 'low' art forms (often including satirical comedy), and are generally performed in small-scale venues. The accessible, intimate and light-hearted nature of cabaret offers unique opportunities for the discussion of social issues.

Following an auto-ethnographic approach, the researcher's personal experiences and challenges will be discussed in relation to the following areas:

- finding a context for the work
- articulating and analysing the use of humour within cabaret
- investigations of the audience-performer relationship
- the process of creating a performance in response to personal interviews.

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## Introduction

What is cabaret theatre? It is: Presentational; Musical; Sexy; Popular; Inexpensive; Dangerous; Messy; Connected. (Friedman 2008, p. 321)

Quintessentially the child of teeming cities, the cabaret was a space where those atomized flâneurs and artists eager for warmth, sometimes bodily as well as human, met to dream the different and to laugh. (Appignaesci 2004, p.7)

This practice-led PhD has emerged from my desire to connect my work as a cabaret writer/performer with issues of mental health in the wider community. In this project, personal interviews conducted with individuals who have suffered from depression are being used as 'inspiration points' for the development of a cabaret performance.

For the purposes of this research I have defined cabaret as a style of performing that includes singing and is focused on directly addressing and connecting with its audience (Friedman 2008, Bessman 2000). In addition, cabaret is generally performed on a "small scale" and "merge [s] the worlds of high and low art" (Friedman 2008, p. 320). I believe that cabaret's intimate nature, that fuses performance styles and privileges the audience-performer relationship, offers exciting opportunities for performatively exploring the issue of depression.

The beauty and the challenge of this research project is that it requires me to place question marks over my own work. These 'question marks' are currently focussed on a number of key areas:

- What methodologies are appropriate for this research?
- How can my work be informed by historical and contemporary cabaret?
- How can humour be utilized within cabaret?
- How can I transform personal stories into cabaret?

This paper will discuss these four points in relation to the first creative development process of my cabaret *Mind Games*.

### What methodologies are appropriate for this research?

My research goals have led me to choose the paradigms of practice-led research and auto ethnography. Gray (1996) defines practice-led research as research that is carried out through practice and is based on the needs of the practice and the practitioner (p. 3). Haseman (2007) supports Gray's definition and comments:

This is a radical and bold innovation, for it not only affirms the primacy of practice in the research process, but it proclaims that the techniques and tools used by the practitioner can stand as research methods in their own right (p. 151).

Following Gray's and Haseman's definition, my research project will be based on my needs and process as a practitioner in the field of cabaret, and will use my creative process as its central focus. This self-reflective process is given a more formalised structure through the strategy of active documentation (de Freitas 2002, de Freitas 2007). Active documentation involves the artist regularly documenting their work and using this documentation to reflect on their process. That is, instead of documenting work purely to describe the artistic process, the artist uses the information gained in documentation to reflect and develop their work. In this way, "implicit and tacit details are extracted from the studio processes" (de Freitas 2007, p. 11). My process of active documentation involves the use of several journals that record my creative ideas, descriptions of improvisations and rehearsals, and personal reflections and analysis.

My choice to draw inspiration from interviews with individuals who have suffered from depression has emerged from a personal interest in hearing individual's stories of their experiences and methods for coping with and overcoming depression. I also hope that the information gained from these interviews will add relevance and personal resonances to the material. In the first phase of this research I have interviewed eight individuals, utilising the technique of the "unstructured interview" (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p. 5). In this approach, the interviewer asks open ended questions that are focussed encouraging individuals to relate their story in their own way. Further questions are employed to encourage this process and to focus on three critical dimensions of human experience and narrative writing: "significance, value, intention" (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p. 9). In this way the interview questions have focussed on encouraging, deepening and building the context of individuals' own stories (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p. 5).

### How can my work be informed by historical and contemporary cabaret?

Leading cabaret scholars may disagree on the specific origins of the cabaret, but are mostly in agreement that the cabaret emerged from the 'voice of the people' of France in the late 1800s. For Friedman (2008), cabaret began with performance by the singer La Bordas in May 1871 in Tuileries Palace. The performance was a revolutionary 'call to arms' "...organised by the Commune of Paris who had seized control of Paris" (Friedman 2008, p.319). An alternative perspective is provided by Appignanesi (2004), who posits that cabaret began with *The Chat Noir*, a venue established in 1881 by Rudolphe Salis (p.12).

*The Chat Noir* was based in the poor, bohemian (then rural) area of Montmartre (Appignanesi 2004, 12). The middle class audience who traveled to Montmartre to attend the performances

knew they were coming to be insulted... Many of the songs or poems performed were based on a parody of middle-brow culture (Appignanesi 2004, p. 15).

Patrons could also expect to have insults personally tailored for them during the show. Salis would often present verbal commentary to shadow plays, improvising references to well known members of the audience:

He had respect for nothing and no one, and with an insolent loquacity, Salis would allow his sharp sense of the actual to demolish bankers and the treasury, politicians and parliamentarianism (Appignanesi 2004, p. 20).

This tradition was continued by the cabaret singer/songwriter Bruant who opened his own cabaret in 1885. Bruant's songs were brutal depictions of street life. Appignanesi (2004) comments that "Bruant's was the initial theatre of provocation and audience insult" and "the people listened, even those upon whose heads Bruant hurled his insults" (p. 25, p. 26).

Street songs, or 'chansons', the basis of the cabaret, "were shocking in their simplicity and in the sordidness of their subjects" and mocked the artistic and social climate of the time (Friedman 2008, p.320). Cabaret then spread throughout Europe and reached its peak in Germany after World War I. The political atmosphere of this time in the Weimar Republic gave rise to a group of left-wing critics who utilized popular forms to satirize German society. One of these popular forms was the cabaret used as "...an outpost of radical

dissent, a finely tuned instrument for illuminating and battling contemporary ills” (Appignanesi 2004, p.128). Despite the highly political nature of these cabarets, the shows were “...lightly lyrical, playfully hiding behind a good-humoured naivety” (Appignanesi 2004, p.161). The development of my cabaret performance is based on Friedman’s concept that the cabaret is not a place, but a style drawing on a long tradition:

Cabaret in this sense is the idea of a certain kind of performance and its relationship to the audience – half play, half concert... cabaret is above all illegitimate. (Friedman 2008, p. 319)

Historically, cabaret has been representative of a dissenting political voice, that is often expressed through parody and satire. Above all, cabaret is marked by its sense of humour, for “piercing wit and contagious laughter [is] essential to the best cabaret” (Appignanesi 2004, p. 6).

### How can humour be utilized within cabaret?

According to Berger (1997), comedy offers a ‘release’ and ‘liberty’ from reality; and “...the experience of the comic presents a world without pain... an abstraction from the tragic dimension of human existence” (p. 60, p. 210). In my cabaret I aim to use humour as a way to positively examine and discuss the complex (and somewhat gloomy) subject of depression. To this end I have been examining the work of other cabaret artists and their use of comic forms. The following paragraphs give an overview of my research in this area and discuss the Australian cabaret artists Paul Capsis and Eddie Perfect in relation to the forms of parody and satire.

The comic form of parody can be seen to ‘re-work’ and ‘play’ with styles and ‘norms’; while satire ridicules society’s norms. Hutcheon’s (1985) states that “parody is one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity ...” and has a “range of intent- from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing” (p. 2, p. 6). In this way, parody does not necessarily denigrate the original text and “... is an integrated structural modelling process of revising, replaying, inverting, and “trans-contextualizing” previous works of art” (*ibid*, p.11). In contrast, satire critiques its subject, and “...has been defined as the ridicule of a subject to point out its faults” (Kreuz and Roger 1993, p.100).

The difference between the two forms is perhaps best summed up by Nabokov, the Russian-American novelist: “Satire is a lesson, parody is a game” (quoted in Hutcheon 1985, p. 78).

These theories of parody and satire can be shown in practice by the work of two contemporary Australian cabaret performers, Paul Capsis and Eddie Perfect. I have chosen these two performers in order to represent two aspects of contemporary cabaret: nostalgia for the past (Capsis), and political satire (Perfect).

### Paul Capsis

Capsis’ style of parody reworks popular culture into a new form, ‘trans-contextualizing’ the work of previous artists and questioning notions of fixed identity. Capsis’ cabaret career has focused on reinterpreting famous singers, reworking and commenting on their performances; and can be seen to use parody to celebrate other singers’ style, eccentricities, and personas. Capsis work can be viewed as part of contemporary cabaret’s tendency to idolise stars of the past, and reinterpret/recontextualise their songs.

October 2006: Capsis burst onto the stage in a flood of sequins.

Unashamedly glamorous and over-the-top, his performance was marked by exuberance, extravagance and joy. Capsis’ performance at The Brisbane Cabaret Festival gave a kind of ‘greatest hits’ of his cabaret work. This was my first introduction to Capsis’ work, who has been described as being “best known as a high-camp singing impersonator” (Shand 1997) and “wicked mimic” (Simmonds 2001) who has “spent a good chunk of his career channeling divas” (Harari 2008).

According to Kreuz and Roberts (1993), “...the parodist makes his or her familiarity with original work obvious...rather than expose ignorance, parody criticises or flatters” (p.103). Capsis’ imitations (or as he terms them, ‘impressions’) clearly fall into the category of the ‘flattering’ parody.

Starting out in theatre, Capsis’ abilities as a mimic lead him towards cabaret performance. Initially, his high vocal range earned him work as a drag queen (Harari 2008) but ultimately Capsis felt that drag was not for him, commenting “I just got bored with drag. I wasn’t connected to it at all” (quoted in Bella 2006), and after a few years he found his niche in cabaret (Bella 2006). By 1997 he had been impersonating singing divas for nine years and had brought together these impersonations in the cabaret *Burning Sequins*. Not content to frock up in his ‘impersonations’, Capsis created cabaret in which he morphed between different performers with minimal costume changes, nailing each singers vocal style in honorific parody.

*Burning Sequins* attracted the attention of theatre director Barrie Kosky, who wrote the show *Boulevard Delirium* for Capsis which premiered in Vienna in 2001 (Bella 2006). Previously Capsis had played “comic tribute” to the

female singers he impersonated, but in *Boulevard Delirium* Kosky deepened this to explore the singers' "...mental instability, shattered dreams and haunted love affairs" (Sheridan 2005) thus "...heightening the implicit theatricality of his portrayal of each woman" (Shand 2002). Under influence of Kosky this became increasingly theatricalised.

In his 'impressions', Capsis shifts between the identities of performer and 'fan'. There is a warmth to Capsis' imitations that comments on their personalities and celebrates their talent. For example, in his Brisbane performance in 2006 he became a drunk, confused Judy Garland unsure of which city she was performing in. His portrayal was both funny and touching revealing his talent to balance humour and pathos. Litson (2007) described his channeling of divas as being "emotionally charged"; and On (2005) stated "Capsis's honeyed voice was tempered with a grit that spoke volumes about the vulnerability of these faded stars" (On 2005). Herbert (2005) notes that Capsis is able to accurately mimic other singers voices, but that "it is more the spirit of these damaged women that he captures" (Herbert 2005). Capsis develops a relationship with his audience as 'co-conspirators' and relies on the audiences knowledge of performer's work. In some ways his performances feel like a nostalgic dinner party where the host shares his favourite records.

Throughout his performances, Capsis 'shape shifts' between performative identities, always retaining his ability to comment on these performers. Capsis works within the 'gaps', re-shifting concepts and questioning norms in a celebration of popular culture.

### Eddie Perfect

Eddie Perfect is a cabaret performer who is reticent to associate with the contemporary cabaret that he views as middle class and self-indulgent. In Perfect's words, "most cabaret is shit" (Horsburgh 2005). Ironically, Perfect's biting satire, audience provocation and anti-bourgeois sentiments have strong parallels with the original French and German cabarets.

Perfect has been involved in challenging the cabaret scene from within. He relates that he likes the 'immediacy' of the artform, because "instead of standing on a soapbox and talking politics you can do it through song and create a mood with music while putting across a message" (Rose 2005a). He feels that although cabaret is "a fantastic artform", it has been 'hijacked' by 'babyboomers' who have made it "camp and slightly indulgent" (Horsburgh 2005).

Perfect's solo show *Angry Eddie* was first performed in Chapel off Chapel in 2003, and then for The 2004 Melbourne Comedy Festival. Westwood (2004) described the show as

...heavy-handed preaching wrapped up in the palatable packaging of cabaret, but beautifully delivered thanks to Perfect's extraordinary charm, voice and musical talents.

For Macdonald (2004), Perfect's humour is "bitingly sharp, outrageously harsh, hilariously wrong and calls people's bluffs on everything from racism to detention centres". In 2005/6 Perfect toured his show *Drink Pepsi, Bitch* throughout Australia and to the Edinburgh festival. The show merged song lyrics and stand-up material critiquing "corporations, rampant consumerism, cynical marketing campaigns, advertising and our own apathy" (Herbert 2005). However, Perfect does not keep his criticisms to one side of the political fence, also taking healthy stabs at the left wing. Herbert (2005) notes that:

His targets are not only high-profile companies. He slams the hippie fascists, those scruffy ferals who come from middle-class families and demand we all ride bicycles, grow dreadlocks and eat tofu.

While Perfect intends to challenge, he prefers the approach of "stroking and striking" the viewers by combining entertainment with hard-hitting messages (quoted in Rose 2005a). He utilizes the combination of music and comedy in order to challenge the audience, encouraging them to "leave their comfort zone and get the deeper joke" (Burchall 2005).

Much of Perfect's satire is leveled at the consumerism, globalization and lifestyle marketing contemporary culture. In particular, he targets the "...cynicism of corporate marketing, the crass materialism of popular culture and the shallowness of middle-class liberalism" (Hopkins 2005). Songs such as "Where is my flat screen TV bitch" and "I wanna go home Ikea", draws attention to shallowness of consumer goals and the notion that "material things will fix problems" (Horsburgh 2005).

Byrne (2006) comments that "Perfect is a very necessary act in any democracy: someone who can tackle the obvious double standards we see every day in our society". However, Byrne goes further to critique Perfect's own double standard remarking: "The only danger with attacking everything is that Perfect is well marketed himself and just as keen to make a buck as the next entity" (Byrne 2006).

The latter years of the Howard era in Australian politics held a concerning parallel with the censorship of the Weimar Republic in Germany. In 2005, Seditious Laws were introduced in Australia, although thankfully never enforced. Perfect was one of Australian performers who protested against these laws with a performance entitled *Sedition*. On February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Coslovich (2006) wrote:

This afternoon a group of artists will descend on the Arts Centre, in St Kilda Road, and try their hardest to get arrested. Comic Rod Quantock will collect money for an unnamed terrorist organisation, cabaret artist Eddie Perfect will sing his ditty John Howard's Bitches and satirist Max Gillies will assume a stiff marionette smirk and do his utmost to make Prime Minister John Howard look like a twat.

In these ways, Perfect can be seen to be continuing the 'seditious' intent of Weimar cabaret in his own contemporary form of musical satire.

#### **How can I transform personal stories into cabaret?**

In transforming personal stories into cabaret songs, I aim to make create a cabaret performance that is accessible, playful, comic and thought-provoking. At this stage I have been transforming interviews into songs by using songs as a direct form of storytelling and by developing songs in response to recurrent themes. My aim in utilizing these comic forms of parody and satire is to develop a playful performer-audience relationship. This approach can be demonstrated through two examples from current creative development process.

While reading one of my interviews with young woman, I was struck by the rhythmic and poetic quality of her spoken language (Personal Journal 5/9/08). This is particularly obvious in the following excerpt:

I first saw a psychologist when I was at school, for the anorexia, yeah, and she thought I was depressed and stuff, but that upset my mother too much, so we didn't actually go back, yeah, she took it really personally ... so I never went back, so I was pretty much on my own... so I'd get onto the internet and you can contact counsellors on the internet, and so I sort of got into that ....(Personal Interview, 27<sup>th</sup> July 2008)

I then investigated ways of singing these words, and began to sing in a 'saccharine sweet' musical theatre style. I found the use of this style interesting as it parodied the form of musical theatre, contrasting the 'neat happy endings' offered by this form with the complexity of real life

experiences. During my interviews I was also struck by the way individuals would often laugh after sharing their darkest moments, possibly to lighten the mood of the situation; and felt that the use of the musical theatre form (and associated exaggerated smile) paralleled this approach, helping to approach the subject matter in a light hearted way. From this inspiration, I began to write a song based on three interviewees' experiences with their therapists, and added the 'corny' chorus "My therapist, my friend, without you where would I be?" (Personal Journal, 5/9/08). The first two verses of this song were taken from the above interview extract and currently in the following form:

I first saw a psychologist  
When I was at school  
She thought I was depressed and stuff  
But that upset my mother too much  
So I didn't go back  
I didn't go back

And then I got on the internet  
You can contact counsellors that way  
I was pretty intellectual  
And I just wanted to know it all  
And I got into that  
I got into that  
(Personal Journal, 5/9/08)

One of the recurrent themes that emerged in the interviews, is of the 'inner critic' or voice inside the head that constantly berates and belittles us. I have been investigating ways of satirising this voice, and developed a poem in which 'bondage mistress' tells their client they are "very bad" (Journal 1/9/08):

You've been a bad, bad girl  
You've no hope of success  
In this whole, wide world  
You need to try a little harder than that,  
Cause you've been so very bad .....

Let me introduce you to your failures  
I'll list them one by one  
Then I will replay you your humiliating moments  
And put them on re-run and re-run.

(Personal Journal, 12/9/08)

These satirical lyrics aim to critique the savageness of the voice of the inner critic, with the aim of ridiculing these self-sabotaging thoughts. I then matched these lyrics with the popular song form of the minor blues, aiming to evoke the atmosphere of a 'depraved nightclub'. Through parodying the 'musical theatre' style, and satirising the savage voice of the inner critic I hope to draw audiences into the themes of the performance.

### Summary

At the time of writing this paper I have yet to perform my first work-in-progress showing, so am curious to discover how an audience will respond to the work. However, through this research project I am developing a healthy respect for cabaret's power to playfully 'open up' areas for discussion; not through debate, carefully constructed arguments, or forums, but through comedy and play. Cabaret seems to thrive between the 'gaps' of fixed forms of identity and meaning, and following Friedman's advice, "...should be fun, and upsetting, professional but not smooth, unexpected but not esoteric" (2008, p.326).

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