

PERFORMING TECHNICAL
INNOVATION: THE
PIONEERING AUDIO WORK OF
TAMARA SAULWICK

MILES O'NEIL

Tamara Saulwick does not consider herself an actress.

Tamara Saulwick is not interested in creating fictional characters.

Tamara Saulwick thinks of herself as a 'short-wave radio antenna'.¹

Tamara Saulwick is a high-profile, interdisciplinary performance-maker based in Melbourne. She is also the artistic director of Chamber Made, a contemporary arts company founded in 1988 and dedicated to making works at the intersection of performance, sound and music. Saulwick has articulated her work as exploring themes of loss/ death, fear, public/ private, memory and place and

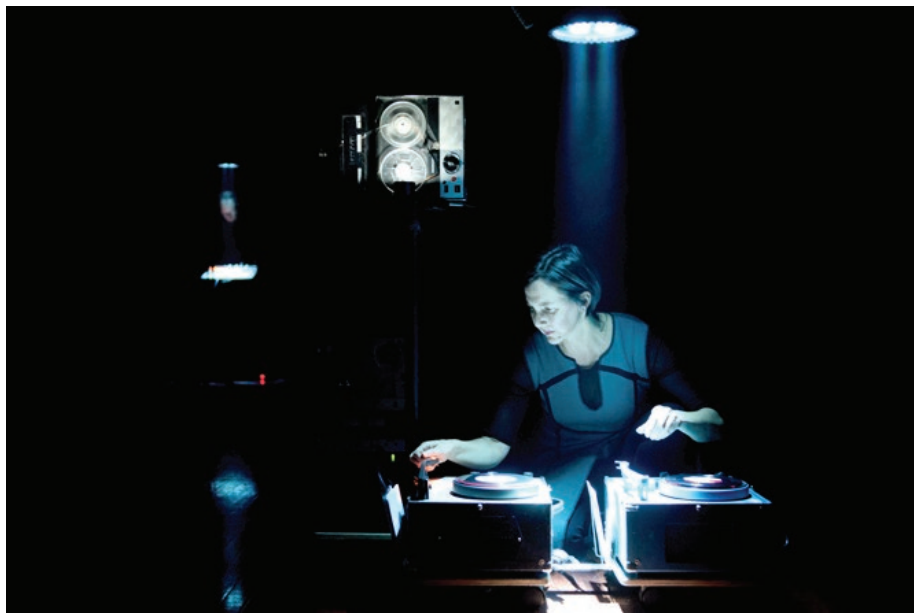


FIGURE 1: TAMARA SAULWICK IN *ENDINGS*, ARTS HOUSE, MELBOURNE, MAY 2015. IMAGE: SARAH WALKER.

is interested in the ways sound can shape the form, content and reception of her work. Although her performance career extends back to 1990, Saulwick has, in recent years, become well known for the evocative and precise sound worlds in her works, particularly since creating her solo performance work *Pin Drop* (2010). With *Pin Drop*, Saulwick cemented her reputation as an acclaimed performance-maker, creating sound-centred works across a variety of mediums – live performance (*Pin Drop* 2010, *PUBLIC* 2013, *Endings* 2015, *Permission to Speak* 2016); installation (*Alter* 2014); and audio walks (*The Archives Project* 2016) – all of which utilise dramaturgies of sound as a key creative feature in both their

development and final production. Saulwick often constructs a series of actions in darkened or deliberately gloomy stage environments, which encourage the audience to privilege listening over watching and plunge the spectator into soundscapes that atmospherically both blur and interrogate the line between the real and the imagined. It is through the evocation of ghostly and multi-layered sonic worlds, and a mixture of live and recorded voice and music, as well as the curious juxtapositions of sound and image, that Saulwick creates what she has called ‘heightened listening states’, ‘sound worlds’ that lure her audience to ‘dream into the work further’.²

In this article, I focus on Saulwick’s two most recent productions as creator and performer – *Pin Drop* (2010) and *Endings* (2015) – and I argue that Tamara Saulwick is one of the foremost innovators of contemporary Gothic theatre. Elsewhere I have argued that contemporary Australian Gothic theatre is at the forefront of performance innovation.³ Here I argue that Saulwick is one of the leading thinkers and makers of the Sonic Gothic and that her experiments in sound production privilege the performer as both producer and object, and negate the traditional construction of the actress as an uncomplicated vocaliser of the playwright, instead foregrounding the performer as a complex entity suggestive of both human and machine, as a body capable of holding, channelling and embodying numerous presences and voices. There is a central contradiction in her work, which is of the performer as rendered both visible producer and the generator of invisible multiple presences, through the creation of many voices. The

works utilise multiple one-on-one interviews that Saulwick undertook with various people, which were edited, combined and sonically treated to form the performance presented onstage through various audio technologies, and at times also spoken by Saulwick herself. My research for this article draws on multiple one-on-one interviews with Saulwick and her sound designer and partner, Peter Knight, and on two weeks of observation of the final creative development of *Endings*. I have also been an audience member of both *Pin Drop* and *Endings*.

Pin Drop premiered to rave reviews in August 2010 at Arts House, Melbourne. Reviewers particularly noted Saulwick's ability to 'call up your memories of fear or threat',⁴ making 'the hairs on the back of your neck stand up'⁵ in 'a tour de force of fear'.⁶ It was a one-woman performance piece, created collaboratively between Saulwick and Knight and performed by Saulwick herself, supported sonically by a combination of live voice, pre-recorded voices, and live and pre-recorded sounds. Saulwick constructed part of the sound design through the manipulation of objects positioned in close proximity to two microphones and then further manipulated through different sonic processing tools by Knight, who was situated behind the audience at the operator desk. *Pin Drop* does not have a linear narrative or conventional plot. Its subject is concerned with women's darkest fears of physical attack, sexual assault and rape, both in the home and walking alone at night. At its aural and dramatic core, *Pin Drop* engaged with a set of eleven audio interviews undertaken

by Saulwick during the two years preceding the premiere. The interviews, recorded in the subjects' homes, concern women who live, or have lived in Melbourne, and focused on the subjects' recollections of moments when they felt or imagined that they were vulnerable or under physical threat. These interviews formed the foundations of the sound design created in *Pin Drop* and the material from which Saulwick constructed her performance. This material should be understood in the context of Australia's very high crime statistics for violence against women as well as Melbourne's history of gendered assault and murder.⁷

Endings also used a collection of recorded interviews as its main source material, this time exploring the experience of death, dying and the afterlife. Premiering as part of the 2015 Sydney Festival and nominated for the 2015 Helpmann Award for Best New Australian Work, *Endings* has since been staged at 'On the Boards' in Seattle, as well as the Brighton, Dublin, and PuSH performing arts festivals in the UK, Europe and Canada. *Endings* was a duo performance by Saulwick and singer-songwriter Paddy Mann (Grand Salvo) and was created through interactions with a collection of analogue sound machines, including portable turntables and reel-to-reel tape players. These interactions and interviews were intertwined with an electro-acoustic sound design, again by Peter Knight, this time positioned upstage centre. Like *Pin Drop*, *Endings* follows no linear narrative or conventional plot, and Saulwick's interview subjects include her own father and also a psychic medium relating to Saulwick's experience

of the loss of her father. Rather than the interviews being delivered digitally exclusively through the theatre speakers, as was the case in *Pin Drop*, Saulwick chose to have them cut on to bespoke vinyl records and recorded on to reel-to-reel tapes. These records and reel-to-reels were then played onstage and, through the use of microphones attached to the machines, live mixed with Knight's sound design and delivered both through the small inbuilt speakers of the machines as well as the main theatre speakers. For Saulwick, this permitted voices to 'emerge ghost-like from the records',⁸ allowing her and Mann to interact with the machines, to physically manipulate the recorded audio and to converse with taped voices live.

In both *Pin Drop* and *Endings*, Saulwick offers completely different staging and vocal delivery and different evocations of sonic 'characters'. Her voice can be broken, shattered and doubled. It can shift pitch, become dissonant and distorted. It can change location, disorientate, encircle and engulf audience members. It can rise above the sound design or disappear within it. Her evocations of the voices of her interviews can also shift location, become embodied through her use of analogue sound technology (the record players becoming mechanical conduits for the absent interviewees), or be edited and processed, chopped up, distorted and disintegrated. These vocal and sonic experiments rewrite and reinvent the meanings and possibilities of theatre, suggesting worlds both in and outside the actual theatre buildings and stage areas, and persistently question both the material and immaterial aspects of theatre itself. If performance

is a summoning of other worlds, as Marvin Carlson has famously asserted,⁹ both real and imaginary, and for Saulwick, perhaps also worlds of spiritual and deathly import, then Saulwick needs to be understood as part of a neo-Gothic revival.¹⁰ Saulwick's mysterious and transfixing sonic innovations challenge orthodox ideas of the single voice in theatre and go far beyond English constructions of the received theatrical voice and the emphasis on the actress who can project up into the gods in the service of a conventional playtext. Her complex part-live, part-technologically contrived vocal innovations, which depend on a close interrogation of states of silence and indistinct and multiple sound, form part of a wider sound-led shift in contemporary Australian performance which rejects traditional English theatre norms and is decidedly post-colonial.¹¹ Saulwick has a particular set of sonic strategies: her innovative use of head-worn radio microphones and her technique of what I will refer to as 'sonic masking'; her embrace and subversion of sonic localisation, psycho-acoustics and sonic engulfment; and the technique Saulwick has termed 'the wired body', that works to de-prioritise monodimensional text and traditional dramatic hierarchies of sound, spectacle and the received idea of the 'actor'.

SONIC GHOSTING AND THE WIRED BODY

Saulwick conceptualised *Pin Drop* as an experiment in both embodied and disembodied sound from the outset. When she enters

the performance space, Saulwick comes to stand downstage right. Already wearing a radio microphone headset, she proceeds to attach a set of in-ear monitors (headphones) to her belt pack and then places the earbuds in her ears. By doing so, she signals to her audience that she is both receiving and delivering sound. Saulwick has described her approach as becoming, in part, ‘a medium or a conduit’.¹² She transforms herself into what she describes as ‘a wired body’: a form of double, embodying herself, her interviewees and her revenants; performer, medium and machine; self and other/s – a conduit for her sonic ghosts. As she has articulated it: ‘when I was thinking about and writing about *Pin Drop*, I was thinking of myself as a transmitter or a shortwave radio signal. I wasn’t thinking in terms of acting.’¹³ When Saulwick speaks of her performance strategies, she is disinclined to speak in terms of a traditional understanding of the actress and the creation of fictional characters. Saulwick recognises what she refers to as a ‘distinction between that dramatic tradition and contemporary performance’ and places herself and her practice firmly in a postmodern, performative realm that she sees as ‘more centred around presence, as opposed to those narrative projects’.¹⁴ Saulwick often speaks in relation to discourses of presence¹⁵ and to conjuring presences (both material and immaterial) onstage, preferring to do so through a predominately task-based methodology. In Saulwick’s words: ‘When you are performing the task of repeating recorded voices, it is the task of repetition and the result is something that looks like acting, while remaining free of the burden of interpretation. I

am the antenna, the signal passing through and coming out.’¹⁶ This understanding of performance as the faithful repetition of others’ actual words relates, in part, to verbatim theatre and is established, through verbatim theatre traditions, as a signal of authenticity between interview subject, performer and audience. The technique is also employed by another Australian acclaimed, sound-led conceptualist, Roslyn Oades. However, in the context of Oades’ work, the metatheatrical strategy of staging the wiring of the body is often used to signify a faithful communication of the pre-recorded text, the performers relaying precisely what they receive in-ear. While Saulwick employs related metatheatrics, she is less concerned with reality or with faithful communication – indeed multiple sounds and voices interweave and text is often fragmentary and indistinct, and the non-verbal sounds are given the same status as words, which is quite different to verbatim. Saulwick deploys some verbatim techniques to generate soundscapes, but the composition of the sound world is not driven by an interest in traditional narrative. Saulwick presents and frames the wiring of her body, but the relationships between the voice/s heard through the speakers in *Pin Drop* and *Endings* and Saulwick’s own voice and body are continually under question and rendered mysterious. Sometimes the voice is processed, edited and manipulated, haunted by the voices of others, including Saulwick herself. Describing a particular moment in *Pin Drop*, critic Tony Reck observed that ‘Saulwick simultaneously relates a [recorded] tale directly to the audience. Both stories are characterised by a general

sense of disquiet. But it remains difficult to ascertain exactly the detail of each.¹⁷ For Saulwick, the borders between live and recorded are deliberately unclear and generate an ethereal quality: ‘the prerecorded voices seemingly float into, out of, and around the live body’.¹⁸ This spine-chilling act of doubling has been likened by Saulwick, via Pieter Verstraete’s ideas of the theatrical disembodied voice,¹⁹ to a form of ventriloquising, where the performer becomes haunted by the other.²⁰ Mary Luckhurst has argued that the notion of the actor is imbued with a language of nineteenth-century mediumship and that actors often report a sense of being haunted by the character they play. Luckhurst identifies the actor’s body as akin to a haunted house: a location for communicating with an ‘absent presence’.²¹ Through a headset microphone, Saulwick often interacts with her sonic ghosts, suggesting an unearthly and poetic dialogue, mimicking her revenants precisely and becoming a haunted second self. Saulwick’s haunted self is often one of performative dissonance, in which the real voice enters the performance arena whole and exits broken. Through the use of sonic processing tools, Saulwick becomes a haunted conduit, a body able to receive another’s words and supposedly authentic story and to rupture that truth simultaneously. However, unlike the actress who is psychologically and physically internally haunted by the fictional character she represents, Saulwick relies on her own task-based dramaturgies and her embrace of sonic technologies to achieve a haunting effect. Saulwick refers to her technique of speaking in dual delivery with her recorded interviewees as ‘ghosting

the audio'.²² She regularly becomes a conduit for her interviewee-revenants, embodying both the threatened victim and the threatening predator, blurring audience perceptions and creating what I term 'the multi-vocal uncanny'. Saulwick describes her role in *Pin Drop* as 'the flesh and nerves through which these stories and voices pass. A multivalent presence, I am the body, the axis, the transmitter, the accompanist, the medium, the victim, the protagonist, the voyeur and the provocateur.'²³ Through blurring the line between the real and the imagined, the seen and unseen, through her multi-vocal performance technique Saulwick constructs a creative ambiguity of theatrical materiality and audience perception, seeming to transform into a gateway for multiple voices to pass through her and to be present within the work at the same time. For Saulwick, 'what's pre-recorded and what's live, that's ambiguous. That's actually something that is a thread to all the works I make, this kind of ambiguity.'²⁴ One particular moment of this ventriloquising occurs in *Pin Drop* during the playback of an interview with a woman telling a story of a time when, as a child, she was pursued through the Australian bush by an older, sexually threatening man. The story of a child fleeing from a predatory adult, through the bush, is the narrative of both global fairytale and Australian cultural memory conjured in fiction and reality and indelibly ingrained through works such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), which itself is contested as both myth and reality. Saulwick is accessing a deep current of cultural anxiety buried within her Australian audiences about their vulnerability in the face

of extreme climate conditions and ubiquitous hostile and dangerous terrains. In so doing, she creates a unique sound-led version of contemporary Australian Gothic theatre.²⁵ In this sound-world, Saulwick conjures both victim and predator, voicing both the little girl fleeing and the older male in pursuit. When the narrator of the story finally makes it out of the bush and to the secure confines of her veranda and her mother, she immediately begins devouring watermelon, looking down the steps of the house at the man lurking on the lawn below. The text and sound of the final moments of this section are conveyed as follows:

I remember burying my face in my mother's skirt and just eating this water-melon and looking and then seeing him looking at me or watching me down from the bottom of the steps.

[A reverb-drenched reprise of 'I didn't scream' begins building beneath this text.]

And I can't remember how this happened.

[The sound of unpleasant, high-pitched frequencies mixed with the sound of buzzing, footsteps, birds.]

Chasing me full pelt. Again, chasing me, and he just kept saying, 'honey, honey'.

*[High-pitched frequency ringing.]*²⁶

As well as this vocal ambiguity, Knight distorts the voices. Through the use of a harmonising processing tool, a voice that sounds at one moment as if it belongs to an adult woman, suddenly shifts in timbre to sound like the voice of a young girl. Here, Saulwick creates a new, culturally specific manifestation of Isabella van Elferen's concept of the Sonic Gothic. Although van Elferen's theorisations only address film, television, music and gaming, and not live performance,²⁷ Saulwick is a clear innovator in this field. Van Elferen's identification of the four key elements that function to create the Sonic Gothic – spectrality, hauntology, hauntography and liturgy – work together in *Pin Drop* to effect a character evocation that is specifically Australian, reminiscent of settler trauma through the evocation of sounds of the bush, and is uniquely performative. Saulwick locates the spectrality of the child's voice duo-delivering the adult voice, a hauntology excavating long lost memories of the Australian bush and of a child-like fear of a predatory presence, and the musical hauntography in the reverb-drenched rhythmic reprise of earlier voices and boundary-breaking liturgy that occurs throughout *Pin Drop* via the immersive use of surround sound. Through Knight's processing and Saulwick's performance, Saulwick's wired body becomes a sonic haunted house in 'a kind of duet'²⁸ with ethereal others who are real but elsewhere, present and yet absent, in a vocal dramaturgy of dark ambiguity. In *Pin Drop*, there is no reliable narrator. Saulwick is both performer and conduit for others; consistently destabilised and destabilising the narratives and the material reception of those narratives throughout the work. She becomes a conduit for

the unseen, a body for the disembodied and a voice for her ghosts and their fears by ventriloquising the absent women. As Saulwick states: 'I think in the audience's mind, I could be seen to be slipping to and fro between perpetrator, victim and witness, right throughout the work'.²⁹ Saulwick's wiring of her body with a radio microphone and headphones allows her to remain, to an extent, half-removed from the work – both performer and operator simultaneously. It is this positioning of herself as producer, operator and performer of sorts that changes her relationship to her audiences. On the one hand, the mechanics of her performative trickery are seemingly laid bare, but on the other hand, the technology paradoxically renders them simultaneously mysterious and magical. She does not present or interpret character in orthodox ways, and indeed 'character' is an uncomfortable term for Saulwick. She generates a myriad of sonic ghosts who materialise in the spectator's imagination and yet she remains a solitary body in the space. In showing the audience her wires and sound equipment yet making no attempt to visually transform into her characters, she relies instead on the power of sound to conjure presences. It is no coincidence that both *Pin Drop* and *Endings* have been adapted for ABC Radio. Saulwick's experiments are reminiscent perhaps of Samuel Beckett, a traceable influence on her and a modernist author who separated the mediums of radio and theatre. Saulwick insists on a new kind of radio theatre where spectators assemble to bear witness to the stories conjured in their minds by her uncanny soundscapes and dissonant frequencies.

THE SONIC MASK

Saulwick's desire to avoid engaging with the idea of conventional character while simultaneously pursuing the evocation of sonic presences has led her to engage with various audio processing tools. Audio processing software such as pitch-shifting, reverb and distortion are applied to Saulwick's voice and used to evoke different sonic characters onstage through altered versions of her live voice in a strategy which I refer to as 'sonic masking'. This vocal manipulation evolved through Laurie Anderson's influence. 'It all goes back to Laurie',³⁰ states Saulwick. She is referring here to Anderson's early work with vocoding and vocal manipulation, described by Anderson as 'weird puppetry'³¹ achieved through live audio processing, particularly pitch-shifting. Pitch-shifting refers to an audio processing technique in which the original pitch of an audio signal is raised or lowered to become higher or lower in frequency. This technique will be familiar to anyone who has heard an LP record played at the wrong speed – that is, slowed down, the sound becomes deeper in pitch, and sped up, it becomes high-pitched. Pitch-shifting has been an identifiable technique of Anderson's performance work since the mid-1970s when she began digitally lowering her voice to a masculine register in a technique she refers to as 'audio drag'.³² Another notable performer utilising audio pitch-shifting is French Canadian theatre-maker and actress Marie Brassard. In his review of the Melbourne Festival season of Brassard's 2005 work *Peep Show*, John Bailey refers to Brassard's audio-manipulated personas as 'masks', although, like Saulwick,

Brassard makes no attempt to physically represent her characters. Bailey writes: ‘In donning these masks, Brassard produces the sense that at that moment, at least, these identities are a kind of truth, and that fantasy itself offers an experience both real and unreal’.³³ While Saulwick credits both Anderson’s and Brassard’s work as influences, she is also cautious about including too much vocal processing in her work.³⁴ When she has used it, Saulwick has taken this technique to an extreme, dropping her voice to a frequency far lower than Anderson or Brassard has done. I was fortunate enough to be present in the rehearsal room when this moment was being workshopped. Saulwick was interested in taking her voice to a point of sonic disintegration and rupturing the connection between the visual and the aural. Up until this point in rehearsal, Saulwick’s voice had remained reliably hers; however, she had become interested in exploring the associations between death and darkness, and while wanting to avoid literalising demons and the dark side, she was drawn to exploring what could be achieved through sonic associations to acknowledge this aspect of her subject. By condensing the lower frequencies of her voice and applying the use of extreme low-frequency pitch-shifting, the voice shattered, becoming so low as to go well beyond the masculine range of Anderson’s ‘audio drag’ and into what Saulwick describes as a low-frequency ‘roaring voice’³⁵ – a vocal shift towards the realm of the audio demonic. During this moment of performance in the final work, all vocal clarity was lost, the text disintegrating into the distorted bass rumblings seemingly emanating from Saulwick’s

body. Visually, Saulwick remained a reliable narrator and made no change to costume or attempt to take on a demonic character physically, but through the use of her sonic mask – a combination of her wired body and extreme audio processing – Saulwick conjured a monstrously grotesque other, becoming, as Kimberly Feltham describes, a ‘demonic presence that was as entrancing as it was terrifying to experience’.³⁶ Saulwick’s demonic presence not only ruptured through a shattering of the aural-visual reality, but through the use of a sub-woofer speaker placed below the seating bank. A sub-woofer speaker is used to transmit low-frequency notes and, in this case, achieves a manifestation of Whittington’s sonic grotesque.³⁷ Whittington defines the sonic grotesque as ‘incongruous elements, which are generally recognisable, but when they are decontextualised, re-mixed, or layered, they provoke revulsion by association’.³⁸ In *Endings*, this speaker was placed underneath the seating bank and during this demonic sequence delivered a bass frequency so loud and low that it shook the seating bank and caused the audience’s bodies to vibrate. Sound that, until this point, had remained localised to the stage – acutely relegated mostly to the small speakers of the analogue machines and to Mann’s acoustic guitar and voice – suddenly swept forth from the stage, underneath the seating bank and up inside the audience’s bodies, creating a physical-aural eruption between Saulwick’s body and the audience’s own bodies, seated in darkness. The effect caused the theatre building to shake as this sound vibrated through the body of the spectator/ listener, forcing the audience

member to be relocated, as Saulwick put it, ‘inside the happening’.³⁹ This may be the listening state that sound theorist Adrian Curtin refers to as ‘affective hearing’.⁴⁰ Curtin writes, ‘if one hears affectively, one hears in such a way as to be physically moved or disturbed’.⁴¹ In *Endings*, Saulwick used a sonic mask to evoke the audio demonic and then forced this audio demon inside the spectator’s body, achieving a level of affective hearing so extreme as to literalise Curtin’s aural disturbance, the very foundations of the theatre shaking with the force of Saulwick’s grotesque sonic masking. This sonic mask tests the boundary between the real and the imagined, places the audience in a soundscape of the sonic monstrous and, in doing so, explores vocal innovations that cannot be achieved without the deployment of the radio microphone, audio processing tools and the localisation of speaker placement to an area which is normally onstage.

SOUND AS PROTAGONIST

It is this physicalisation of sound that drives Saulwick’s dramaturgical choices; whether she is finding ways to interact with her pre-recorded sound vocally or physically, Saulwick is driven to manifest sound onstage. For example, a scene in *Endings* involves Saulwick interacting with a recording of her visit to a psychic medium. This digital recording has been transferred on to a reel-to-reel tape and was embodied onstage by a large reel-to-reel tape player positioned downstage right. Saulwick entered and sat next to the tape player, treating the analogue machine

and the voice emanating from it almost as another performer. Saulwick interacted with this sonic machine using her ghosting method of speaking in duo-delivery with the sound of her own voice in the recording, while letting the sounds of the psychic's voice answer unaccompanied. The focus of the interview involved the psychic trying to contact Saulwick's deceased father. As the psychic did so, the natural hiss of the tape-head, the distortions of the tape passing over this head, and the crackle of the worn old speakers all added to the embodying of the psychic's voice and pointed to the possibilities of haunted sounds, calling to mind the phrase, the 'ghost in the machine'. It is no coincidence that both these recording methods are temporary and that they decay, little by little, with each performance. Saulwick was acutely aware of the ephemeral nature of these objects and celebrated the sonic disintegration offered with each session. Not only were the records and reels degrading with each performance, the audio objects – the record and tape players – had to be handled with a delicacy reminiscent of palliative care. They were old and unreliable, and could, on occasion, suddenly stop working midway through playback of an interview and have to be revived with a gentle thump on the back. This happened often during rehearsals; however, rather than have the interviews presented in the much more reliable digital format or fake the use of the analogue machines by installing small digital players inside, Saulwick persisted, adamant that the voices must come from a physical, slowly decaying form. Her sonic presences crackled forth from the tinny speakers, and, through the use of hard-wired microphones attached to the record players and reel-

to-reels, these crackling voices were also live mixed into the theatre speakers. Through the use of audio panning and audio equalisation, attempts were made to align the voices with the machines onstage in the minds of the audience – a technique known as ‘audio localisation’. If a small record player was located downstage right, the sound operator would pan the audio signal running into the theatre speakers, so it was only coming from the downstage right speakers. This audio mixing gave the aural effect of a voice coming from an exact location onstage. As well as embracing this technique, Saulwick often challenges her sonic localisation. She is acutely aware of the transgressive and immersive potential of speaker placement. In both *Endings* and *Pin Drop*, Saulwick was concerned with placing speakers in unconventional arrangements to better conjure voices onstage, and to exploit sound’s ability to violate, disorientate and engulf spectator bodies. Unlike *Endings*, however, which was predominantly focused on locating sounds accurately onstage, *Pin Drop* was concerned much more with vocal and sonic ambiguity. Saulwick and Knight are expert at creating what I term the ‘sonic haunted house’. Immersing their audiences in a complex sonic chamber through multiple speakers surrounding the audience seating bank and a sub-woofer positioned below the seating bank, Saulwick and Knight then fill this chamber with a soundscape of distorted and disembodied sound designed specifically to evoke memories and associations of fear. This allowed Saulwick’s voice and her sonic protagonists to move around the space. During the work, voices would float across the room and footsteps would circle the

audience, seated in darkness in a strategy critic Alison Croggon identifies as a ‘psychic echo chamber’.⁴² Croggon writes: ‘Smoke, darkness, light and sound powerfully call up your own memories of fear or threat. In *Pin Drop*, the theatre becomes, quite nakedly, a kind of psychic echo chamber.’⁴³ An echo chamber has two distinct yet interrelating definitions: one refers to a large room used for the creation of reverb when recording audio; the other, to a social phenomenon in which opinions are thought not to escape beyond the cultural bubble in which they are created. Croggon’s echo chamber describes an enclosed space of a psychological nature in which memories of fear and threat are not only summoned but allowed to ricochet, haunting the theatre space through the summoning of psychic revenants. Saulwick’s provocation of terror in her audience occurs through her deployment of cultural and mnemonic triggers which allow new associations of threat to well up in the spectator. As Knight states:

What Croggon is responding to is what we were trying to do, to create a space for your own thoughts to bounce around in. The show encouraged your own stories to surface. You are for a lot of that piece alone in the dark with your own thoughts. You’re in sound.⁴⁴

For Knight, the aim was to allow thoughts not simply to occur, but to bounce, to move around the space, returning to the spectator in a random and unexpected manner. As Saulwick has argued, ‘I

was trying to engage with and evoke in people that uncertain space where you don't know if you're under threat or not, and to evoke those memories'.⁴⁵ Saulwick's psychic echo chamber functions as the equivalent of a psychological prison cell in which the spectator is trapped, alone and in the dark with their own panic and terror; this space is one which the spectator is encouraged to populate with their own fears – their own sonic ghosts. Saulwick is interested in using sound to explore 'how we become engulfed by fear'.⁴⁶ Both Saulwick and Knight revel in the psycho-acoustic possibilities offered in theatres. This speaker placement for *Pin Drop* creates a captive listening space by enveloping the audience, placing them, as Knight expresses it, 'in sound'⁴⁷ and it allows Saulwick to circle the audience sonically, while remaining physically present onstage.

CONCLUSION

Saulwick's sonic experiments are significant and are driven, in part, by a disregard for old-school acting traditions and orthodox theatrical dramaturgies. As Saulwick states, 'I'm not really interested in pretending that I'm someone else. I'm interested in those voices and what those voices bring to the work and in finding ways to be a vehicle for those voices.'⁴⁸ In Saulwick's work, sound is privileged and becomes both presence and methodology. Through a combination of sonic strategies, Saulwick conjures presences from the darkness while offering herself as both a technical operator and a mediumistic

vessel for other presences. She presents herself as both machine and performer, as a vessel and an agent, and in doing so, she distorts reality, adopting the sonic grotesque and the *unheimlich* to expose her audience to her sonic revenants. For Saulwick, sound is a dramaturgical tool that blurs boundaries, reality and imagination, between life and death, between self and other, and between body and machine. As Mark Smith has written: ‘ghosts are never just ghosts; they provide us with an insight into what haunts our culture’.⁴⁹ Saulwick’s technological and theatrical innovations are redefining the construct of the performer, innovating in the realm of theatrical sound design and are proving to be pioneering in the new world of the contemporary Australian Gothic.

NOTES

- 1 Tamara Saulwick, Interview with Miles O’Neil, 28 November 2018. online: <http://theatre-notes.blogspot.com.au/2011/08/review-pin-drop-observe-sons-of-ulster.html>.
- 2 Tamara Saulwick, Interview with Miles O’Neil, 17 March 2017.
- 3 Miles O’Neil, ‘Contemporary Australian Gothic Theatre Sound’ (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2018).
- 4 Alison Croggon, ‘Review: *Pin Drop*’ (Theatre Notes, 3 August 2011),
- 5 Anne-Marie Peard, ‘*Pin Drop*’ (*Aussie Theatre*, 11 September 2010), online: <http://aussietheatre.com.au/reviews/pin-drop-2>.
- 6 Stephen Russell, ‘*Pin Drop*’, online: www.tamarasaulwick.com/pin-drop-reviews.
- 7 *Pin Drop* reflects a major cultural issue regarding the current high levels of domestic abuse and sexual violence towards women in Australia, as investigated by books such as Sarah Wendt, *Domestic Violence in Rural Australia* (Sydney: Federation, 2009); Clementine Ford, *Fight Like a Girl* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2016); and Megan Norris, *Look What You Made Me Do: Fathers Who Kill*

- (Melbourne: Echo, 2016). According to statistics, every year in Australia, over 300,000 women experience violence – often sexual violence – from someone other than a partner; eight out of ten women aged 18 to 24 were harassed on the street in the past year, and on average, at least one woman a week is killed by a partner or former partner in Australia. See online: www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4906; www.tai.org.au/content/everyday-sexism; www.aic.gov.au/publications/current%20series/mr/21-40/mr23.html (accessed 6 August 2018).
- 8 *Endings*, online: www.tamarasaulwick.com/endings.
- 9 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).
- 10 O’Neil, ‘Contemporary Australian Gothic Theatre Sound’.
- 11 See Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996); Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, *Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007); and Denise Varney, *et al.*, *Theatre and Performance in the Asia-Pacific: Staging Regional Modernities in the Global Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).
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Actresses and Their Negotiation of Celebrity in the 21st Century' is published in *The Palgrave Handbook of the History of Women on Stage* (2019). In October 2019, she curated a symposium at Oxford University with Sophie Duncan, called 'Infinite Variety: Older Actresses on the Stage'. She is currently writing a book on contemporary celebrity actresses.

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