“It’s Alive”: Towards a Monsterized Theatre with Beatbox Academy’s Frankenstein: How to Make a Monster (2018 - )’

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“It's Alive”: Towards a Monsterized Theatre with Beatbox Academy’s Frankenstein: How to Make a Monster (2018 - )

Electrifying gig. Thrilling theatre. Tongue-twisting vocal gymnastics. Mary Shelley’s original, re-imagined with songs, soundscapes and sonic trickery. Experience the power of the human voice breathing life into monsters all around us. Frankenstein will leave you asking: who are the monsters we fear? Who created them? And how the hell did they just do that with their voices?!f

Description, Edinburgh Fringe Online Programme, 2019. ¹

Following successful runs at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in London in 2018 and 2019, Frankenstein: How to Make a Monster (FHMM) was performed in the Traverse Theatre in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2019 by a diverse collective of young people from Beatbox Academy (BA). As an audience member, the atmosphere created by this award-winning hip hop version of Mary Shelley’s novel Frankenstein (1818), which had been devised as part of the BA participatory project at BAC, felt electrifying.² The show, which used beatboxing blended with other vocal practices such as rap, MC-ing and melodic singing, engaged with serious subject matter, and unleashed feelings of admiration, goodwill and pleasure. After the performance, I observed people leaving the auditorium energised and excited, experiencing a wave of affect that was carried into on-line reviews. One audience member noted the ‘infectious energy’ and ‘endless generosity’ of the performers, another commented how the show ‘burst with youthful energy’, and on its galvanising effects: ‘at the end of our show the audience literally all jumped up at once’. It was as if the ‘monsters’ identified by the young performers in their adaption of the novel, social ills that included acts of irresponsible creation, cultural cruelty and othering, were temporarily vanquished. Professional reviewers were awestruck by the ‘staggering’ talent and ‘gorgeous’ singing of the BA collective, showering the award-winning show with five-star reviews. Words such as ‘empowerment’,

² FHMM won Off-West and Total Theatre Awards in 2019, and was a British Council showcase in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was co-directed by Conrad Murray and David Cumming.
‘confidence’ and ‘joy’ studded the warm, heartfelt responses. Many referred to a physical, almost visceral response, to alterations in bodily mechanisms, ‘This is an old story made electrically alive. Let it take your breath away’. It will ‘make your tummy lurch’. Reading the reviews a sense of animation emerges of a collective audience body, shocked and electrified by currents of surprise and pleasure, a battery of voices buzzing long enough to document their experiences of thrill, excitement and joy.

Examining the practices and processes deployed by the young performers of the BA collective in the making of FHMM, this article explores the capacity of beatboxing to generate rhythmic connections between bodies and materials, creating the sense of ‘electrification’, ‘liveness’ and ‘aliveness’ reflected in the above responses, and contributing to the new meanings generated by the adaptation of an old story. In seeking to respond to the growing prevalence of ‘gig’ forms in British theatre that combine theatrical, musical and technological practices in ways that I suggest nuance and enhance rather than diminish the ‘usual virtues’ of live theatre, it links to ongoing explorations in performance studies of the animation of sociality through the heightening of sensory engagement and transmission of affect, as well as looking to musicologists to explore the vocal percussion techniques deployed by the BA. Not wishing to simply recirculate clichés around “the magic of live theatre’, I approach the ‘liveness’ of performance as a set of energies, techniques and powers that are informed by the lived and artistic experience of performers, animated through musical and participatory practices, mediated in performance by sound, breath, blood, plastics, and electronic equipment, and sensed in the bodies of audience members.

In assembling my critical components, I adapt an image used in Donna Haraway’s ‘The Cyborg Manifesto’ of an ‘integrated circuit’, itself seized by Haraway from the work of second wave feminist Rachel Grossman where it was used to examine the use of management techniques to regulate the labour and behaviour of Malaysian women within the global electronics industry. Here, I am following Haraway in deploying the phrase metaphorically.

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3 These comments are taken from on-line print media reviews hosted by The Stage, Exeunt, The Times, The Guardian, WhatsonStage and Edfringe of the productions of FHMM at BAC (March 2018) and the Traverse (August 2019). [ALL PRINT MEDIA, WAS THE INTERNET BLOG RESPONSE DIFFERENT?]
4 Dan Rebellato, Theatre & Globalization (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 41.
6 Donna Haraway, Manifestly Haraway (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2016) [1985], 37.
to explore artistic, musical and technological practices in contemporary British theatre and its industrial context. Perceptions of this context have been marked by its historical associations with ‘high’ culture, its perpetuation of ‘closed’ and ‘exclusive’ circuits of opportunity and labour, its circulation of ideology through literary and text-based forms of theatre, and a practice of spectatorship based in motionless attention. I am exploring how the ‘integrated circuitry’ of British theatre might be rewired and extended through musical forms that ignite affect, stimulate more unruly and inclusive audiences, and open the industry to wider performance ecologies resonating with diverse cultural traditions and sociocultural practices. In addressing a musical form that has entered British theatre, this article resists familiar discourses and narratives that racialize or simplify hip hop culture, or denigrate incursions of popular or sensory aspects of musical performance. Rather it seeks to engage with a piece of British ‘gig theatre’ that along with others such as Debris Stevenson’s *Poet in da Corner* (2018), Arinzé Kene’s *Misty* (2018), and Middle Child’s *Canary and the Crow* (2020), have in the late 2010s and early 2020s deployed hip hop styles such as rap and grime to realise musical dramaturgies as a mode of storytelling in a range of UK fringe, subsidised and commercial theatres. I argue that the experience and energy of young voices, empowered through vocal technologies and musical form, and made present through the participatory practices of the BA, provide a catalyst for a reanimated theatre public. I understand the performers of *FHMM* as agents of ‘liveness’ who deploy vibrant sonic and rhythmical practices as skilful dramaturgical strategies that convey narrative and meaning viscerally, and which stimulate the circulation of joyful and exhilarating affect.

As part of my exploration of the sonorous, rhythmic and animating storytelling of *FHMM*, I am interested in the ways that technologies of voice, music, and sound amplification integrate and regulate bodies, materials and technologies in pleasurable and/or transgressive ways. This article will consider not only BA’s creative embodied practices but also its use of amplifiers and microphones, the latter a technology dubbed by a veteran theatre maker in industry newspaper, *The Stage*, a ‘monster of theatre’. Though such technologies are relatively newly legitimised in British venues known largely for text-based theatre and continue to meet resistance from professionals who favour the ‘natural’ projection of the voice, their integration, along with digitised vocal sound, is part of a current wave of

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experimentation in the staging of ‘sonic socialities and subjectivities’ noted by Salomé Voegelin. Not only do sound technologies open and amplify dramaturgical possibilities, they point to the more diverse range of social and cultural contexts through which vocal and embodied practices are reaching the theatre. In exploring ‘cyborgian’ aspects of vocal performance, and its illusionary, uncanny or estranging effects, it has been helpful to refer to the work of the ‘first generation of voice studies scholars’ who have explored properties of voices largely in relation to European traditions of cultural schema. It has also been necessary and illuminating to recognise the diverse cultural genealogies of musical and sonic dramaturgies that have informed the development of beatboxing and other hip hop practices. In particular, I have been influenced by the fieldwork of Julian Henriques on the outdoors dancehalls of Kingston Jamaica and its ‘crowd’ (the preferred local term for audience), who attend the dancehall nights for the ‘pleasure of the “vibes”’. Henriques advances a ‘vibration model’ which suggests how affect is expressed and propagated rhythmically through corporeal, material and sociocultural media. His research demonstrates how the use of heavy amplified base heightens the ‘whole-body vibrotactile experience’ generated by amplified musical ‘vibes’. This is relevant to beatbox performance, where the human voice imitates the rhythmic beats of machines, where technologies of sound electronically convert, enhance, and amplify the sonic pulse, and where amplified electronic vibrations are the medium of the crowd’s haptic experience.

In this article, I frequently document my sensations and observations as a researcher and member of the crowd. My aim is to deploy a methodology that uses my own embodied responses to acknowledge the energies and affects that passed into and through my body as I encountered BA’s devising processes and the staged musical performance of FHMM. This is to follow critical approaches from musicology such as that of Henriques, and also from performance scholarship that tracks affective or embodied responses of audiences. Dugal McKinnon, for example, describes the ‘unnerving and/or exhilarating’ effect of ‘immersive loudspeaker environments’, where listeners encounter sound ‘in forms of ambiguous

provenance, heard in the absence of visual cues.'\textsuperscript{13} His observation points to affective response to perceived distortions of image and sound as a form of ‘live’ corporeal registration. ‘Liveness’ therefore can be at least partly reconstituted as a ‘listener-determined’ phenomenon that attends to the play of physical and affective impulses and responses in the bodies that stage perception.\textsuperscript{14} In adapting this approach I use my verbal interpretations of ‘feeling and sensing’ as a methodological tool that accepts the interrelationality of bodies and things, which enables me to explore affective, rhythmic and temporal sensations, and to address the social relations orchestrated between and experienced by performers and audiences. \textsuperscript{15} Exploring my own response to the rhythmic element of beatboxing and the way that its manipulation allows performers to intervene in a listener’s perception and understanding of time has been a crucial element in my critical pursuit of ‘liveness’. As performance scholar Luciano Mariti argues, “the ‘temporal “quality’” particular to performance is drawn from the ‘actor-spectator relationship: a “living” relationship’” that ‘draws upon the “forces” of time’.\textsuperscript{16} These are points to which I will return in my explorations of beatboxing (see p. XX), whose temporal and material pulses suggest circuitry that links the human and the electronic. For Conrad Murray, co-founder and artistic director of BA, the ‘liveness’ of performance emerges as moments of interaction with audience members who might otherwise be detached by the deadening effects of the fourth wall in performance and the dominant edict in the majority of theatres for audiences to be quiet and still.\textsuperscript{17} Following Murray’s pedagogies and values, beatboxing dramaturgy becomes a live rewiring of theatrical spaces and systems.

\textbf{Beatbox Academy}

Beatbox Academy (BA) based at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) uses beatboxing as the central artistic practice of its grassroots participatory performance project. It has grown out of a South London context where beatboxing is one of a range of hip hop influenced performance

\textsuperscript{14} McKinnon, ‘Broken Magic’, 269.
\textsuperscript{17} Conrad Murray, interview with author, September 20, 2019 London.
practices that includes garage and grime music, the latter a culturally influential form of
music making and political critique in the UK. Beatboxing itself is a form of vocal percussion
that emerged as part of the hip hop scene in urban centres in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s
when proponents started to imitate the sounds of electronic drum machines (beatboxes). It is
now practised worldwide by people from younger ages and upwards in every day spaces,
such as bedrooms, streets, and schools, as well as in music clubs and in commercialised
global championships. In musicology, scholars have located beatboxing within
universalistic or evolutionary narratives that regard vocal percussion as a form of human
music making, but also point to it as an art form that emerges specifically through histories of
black performance that go back to the to the foot stomping and hand clapping ‘ring shout’ of
African slaves in American colonies. For communications anthropologist Tok Thompson,
beatboxing negotiates ‘a new sort of man-and-machine type of identity, a synthesis between
human and computer’. As one of a range of vocal practices associated with hip hop,
beatboxing remains affiliated with a socially conscious subcultural resistance, and the ‘global
hood’, a shifting site of contemporary transnational exchange. Practitioners often also use
or collaborate with spoken word or rap performers, incorporating politicised commentary on
issues such as racial and economic inequality. Its often self-taught, cut-and paste DIY
aesthetic allows its practitioners to sample and cite other artists’ sounds and rhythms, and by
doing this make affiliations that contribute to their development as artists connected with a
much wider cultural and industrial ‘circuitry’ that extends across the world, and from which
traditional mainstream text-based theatre in the UK has remained largely disconnected.

See, for example, Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip
Hop and Why it Matters* (New York: Basic Books 2008), and Milosz Miszczyński and Adriana Helbig
(eds), *Hip hop at Europe’s Edge: Music, Agency and Social Change* (Bloomington: Indiana
University Press, 2017) for critical accounts of commercialized and politically engaged hip hop in
local contexts.

See Paul Théberge, ‘Click/ Beat/ Body: Thoughts on the Materiality of Time and Tempo’, in *The
(344). For more detailed musical genealogies of beatboxing, see Michael Proctor et al, ‘Paralinguistic
mechanisms of production in “beatboxing”: A real-time magnetic resonance imaging study’, *The
Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 133 (2013), 1043-1054; and Michael Atherton,
‘Rhythm-Speak: Mnemonic, Language Play or Song’, *Proceedings of the International Conference

Tok Thompson, ‘Beatboxing, Mashups, and Cyborg Identity: Folk Music for the Twenty-First

Katie Beswick, *Social Housing in Performance: The English Council Estate on and off Stage*
BA uses the distinctive beatboxing style as part of an ensemble process of creation and performance for theatrical spaces, integrating into its collective aesthetic common features of hip hop such as moments where performers’ virtuosic skill is spotlighted or where participants contest each other. Unlike more ‘spectacular’ shows such as the commercial success *Hamilton* (2015), whose vibrant music and choreography refers in depth to hip hop histories, the BA draws on traditions of live hip hop performance as an interactive and participatory form, relating with its audience as a community of which it is a part. Due to its participatory approach, where the BA extends its connections through workshops and outreach both locally and to the places to which it tours, audiences will often include many members to whom the performers are personally known. In the BA shows that have taken place at BAC, many of these audience members are family and friends, some of whom attend to support or collect its participants, fitting this in between other caring responsibilities and obligations at work and in domestic life. The project, which began at BAC in 2008, is advertised as a weekly drop-in group for young people and adults. Murray, who grew up on a nearby social housing estate and joined BAC youth theatre groups as a teenager, spoke to me about his own background, ‘I loved listening to music at home, he told me, ‘It was the only thing that made me feel good’. His remark, understood in the context of the difficult circumstances of his home life, suggests complex relations between pleasure, talent, and opportunity for individuals within disadvantaged economic, social and cultural contexts. His inclusive approach to participation in the BA provides a platform of co-creation and collective pleasure in music making, but also supports the development of artistic and economic opportunities for the members of the collective. The devising of *FHMM*, for example, was partly conceived as a means of gaining paid work for its members, some of whom face challenges that include extreme economic precarity, mental health issues and homelessness.

On the evening I visited a BA participatory session at the BAC in London following its Edinburgh run, the group was diverse in terms of age (despite the advertised cap of 30), race, ability and gender, and included participants with autism and learning needs. The session began with participants in a ‘circle jam’, a base activity, used by Murray in sessions before the introduction of any microphone work. In a jam, one participant starts by vocally

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22 Murray, interview.
improvising a rhythmic base line from the foundation sounds of beatboxing, ‘Boom-Tee-Cla’ that onomatopoeically mimic the sounds of base and snare drums, and hi-hat cymbals. This is known as ‘pitching’, a process that does not happen in relation to the notes specified in the music scales of the classical music tradition, but allows a participant, whether formally trained in music or not, to provide a percussive ‘ground’ on which other participants vocally weave and layer. As I observed the BA session, participants built on the base pitch, each adding their own sounds, melodies and beats, as well as using ‘sampled’ fragments and tag lines from well-known hip hop tracks, ‘I’ve got the power’ and ‘Ready or not’. The sense of ‘pitch’ used in the circle jam is close to the word’s meaning as ‘hurl’ or ‘throw’, as if the vocal sound sent out is a rhythmic energy for others to catch and to which they attune. As Murray explained, ‘Whoever starts that first note or beat, we’ll go on that tempo…’ In this way, the activity could be understood as a kind of co-composition in time, a continuous interchange of ideas, in which leadership becomes fluid and alternating as in a chamber ensemble or jazz band where information is shared. A collective perception seemed to be present, such as that identified by music educators in the shared intentionality of group music making. Together the participants seemed to create a moving sculpture of sounds that arose and fell in the room, reaching across and up into its high ceilings, a space that seemed transformed to me by this event of collective sonic imagination. Reflecting on the session afterwards, I thought of the circle jam as a form of artistic heightening of the sonorous interrelations between human beings explored by philosopher Adriana Cavarero, relations embodied and intensified by voices taking a ‘vital pleasure’ in revealing their own unique textures in communication with others.

Later in the session, some of the young participants continued to improvise, now using microphones and electronic sound amplification to experiment with highly energised rhythmic clicks, riffs and deep guttural machine-like sounds. Their performance became both intensely concentrated, and gloriously hedonistic, as they wound each other up to beatbox with ever more intensity, volume and speed. At this point, the experiences of pleasure and

enhanced spatial awareness that I had experienced in hearing the circle jam were nuanced with sensations that were both compelling and disorientating. The addition of microphones had allowed voices to be thrown further, altering the relations of the performers with their own voice, and with me the witness and listener. Standing with the performers behind me, I experienced a sense of spatial distortion as the sounds bombarded me from the speakers angled downwards in front of me, causing my own body to vibrate, and eliciting there a rhythmic response in spite of the somewhat uncanny sensation. Later, I realised I had been experiencing what is known in biomusicology as ‘entrainment’ – where auditory input carrying rhythmic stimulus results in involuntary movements in the body of the listener.  

Drawn in by the young performers’ concentrated and spontaneous beats, I had felt suspended in time, magnetised, partly at the mercy of their astonishing vocal play. This, and the impression given by the buzzing, sparking and fizzing of the beatboxing sounds of something mechanical or electronic had given me the uncanny sensation that something non-human were at play. The addition of the microphones had not diminished my pleasure but had changed its character, wiring in my body rhythmically, charging it with the vibes coursing with the beatboxers’ electronically amplified sounds. After staying to chat with the performers, I left the session with a warm, uplifted feeling of social contact, with the energy of the amplified beats still ringing in my ears. My curiosity had been stirred by the BA’s joyful, self-extending and sociable practice, and its ability to get under my skin, making a live and lingering ‘vibrotactile experience’, that affected both my body and mind.

‘Sonic trickery’ / rhythmic resonance

The participatory processes of BA described above, draw out sound and rhythm from performers’ bodies, establishing embodied, integrated relations through collaborative musical composition, and draw in listeners through live physical and affective experiences of musical listening. I turn in this section to a consideration of how beatboxing also produces liveness through processes that provoke ideas of bodily transgression, intervention or disturbance, which become triggers for affective response. This article explores the sense, following Haraway, in which beatbox performance might form a kind of ‘cyborgian circuitry’, a knitting together of human and machine that is both ‘potent and taboo’, a kind of ‘rejoicing’

in ‘illegitimate fusion’. The term ‘cyborgian’, used from the 1960s according to the OED, refers to a person whose capacities are ‘extended beyond normal human limitations by a machine or other external agency that modifies the body’s functioning’. Alternatively, a cyborg is ‘an integrated man-machine system’. It follows that in order to qualify as cyborgian, the performative practice of beatboxing must involve the physical integration of human and machine, or an extension of bodily capacities. Although Dan Stowell and Mark D. Plumbley characterise beatboxing as an art of ‘illusion’, ‘impersonation’ and ‘imitation’, it is clear from their fascinating elucidation of vocal percussion techniques that the imaginative motor ignition in beatboxing of sonic, electronic and rhythmic energy expands the narrow and normative range of sound produced by humans that serve normal language-based vocalisations. In fact, as with other forms of vocal training, the vocal techniques that beatboxing demands can distinctively alter human anatomy. Even breathing is modified: performers, who can sometimes produce beats and melodic sounds simultaneously, learn to produce non-verbal sounds on in-breaths, making inhaled sounds such as the ‘inward clap snare, enabling a continuous flow of sounds and beats’. Such practices intervene in the respiratory mechanism, enhancing the potency and strangeness of performers, their bodies to some extent ‘synched’ through creative imitation to electronic rather than ‘natural’ or ‘human’ sounds and rhythms.

It is arguably in its key rhythmic dimension where the integration in beatboxing of wo/man and machine is most potent. For Raymond Williams, whose scholarship is alive to the structures of feelings in lived encounters, ‘rhythm is a way of transmitting a description of experience, in such a way that the experience is re-created in the person receiving it’. This is ‘more than metaphor’, but a ‘physical experience as real as any other’ that is effected ‘on the blood, on the breathing, on the physical patterns of the brain’. Williams’ remarks, which in

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29 Haraway, 57.
some ways anticipate neuroscientific understanding that has developed since the 1990s, are made as part of his wider discussion of the ‘vital descriptive effort’ made in human communication, and the ‘powerful means’ that artists possess of achieving it. In this light, the simulation by beatboxers through onomatopoeic performance of electronically generated rhythmic beats and other sounds, suggests a material connection between human and ‘non-human’ actors that is powerfully physically and artistically shared in performance with the bodies of other humans. Rather than producing the deadening expressionlessness and automated obedience however that has sometimes been associated with ‘inhuman’ digital or metronomic beats, beatboxing drives an expressiveness that is inevitably de-regularised and enhanced artistically by the human body. In beatboxing sounds and rhythms are accelerated and decelerated, temporarily paused, or ‘mixed’ with sounds of back beat cutting and record scratching. These sounds refer to a repertoire of techniques resonating with many contexts where sound technologies have been manipulated – such as at the outdoor dancehalls described by Henriques where MCs use the ‘rewind’ or ‘pull up’- to build affective impact in the crowd. Such techniques can be considered as vocal and auditory versions of the ‘visible cuts, pauses and blackouts’ that according to Mariti generate a felt sense of dynamicity and duration in theatre, and which heighten excitement and pleasurable tension. These rhythmic and sonic arts manipulate the crowd’s sense of suspension, and elicit embodied and affective response. For Mariti, the process of “embodied simulation” is not ‘automatic’ but ‘resonant’ behaviour, and a stimulation of “dramaturgical competence” through “body-to-body” contact. Applied to hip hop crowds, the animation and pleasure experienced through beatboxing’s rhythmic manipulation is a resonance of the performers’ joy and embrace of the beat that is felt in auditory and haptic modes. I am arguing here that the BA performers, in their hedonistic play, pass sounds, sensations and bodily energies into theatre space, creating social relations that are orchestrated according to the rhythms of bodies which are themselves inspired by and resonating with the embodied echoes and energies of machines.

35 See Falletti, Theatre and Cognitive, 7.
36 Paul Théberge, ‘Click / Beat / Body’, p.346.
37 Henriques, ‘Vibrations’, 64.
As I hope will be becoming clear, beatboxing derives some of its potency from its capacity to perform sound in ways that challenge understandings of human ontology and bodily mechanisms. Further, its use of microphones brings into play the relations between the visible and auditory in our understanding of the human subject. Brandon LaBelle argues that ‘The mouth functions to figure and sustain the body as a subject, a subject within a network of relations.’ (emphasis original). Whereas in conventional vocal performance the mouth tends to remain clearly visible as the source of vocal sound, in beatboxing, the microphone is often held so close to the mouth as to obscure it, semi-covered by the hands in order to produce a bassier effect. To the witness like me, a habitual theatre-goer relatively unversed in beatboxing practice, the technique can be disorientating, enhancing a sensation that the vocal sound produced, in its unfamiliar character and mediation, is not entirely of the body. Such perceived distortions, as cultural theorists have discussed with reference to the acousmatic voice, may elicit powerful affective responses related to specific cultural and religious schema. Mladen Dolar points out, for example, that in many languages the word for ‘breath’ is etymologically linked to that for spirit, the voice apparently embodying ‘the flesh of the soul’. In its intimate ‘close-mic’ technique, beatboxing disturbs the religious and cultural sense of the soulful human interior. At times in beatboxing, the mouth is bypassed altogether, the microphone positioned near the nose or throat, amplifying what Murray calls the ‘sub sounds’ of performers’ bodies. What becomes audible can be deeply unfamiliar – whirring, clicking or buzzing sounds that suggest a fleshily engineering that is digital, electronic and mechanical rather than divine, and far from the ethereal sounds of chants and psalms which have traditionally suggested spiritual dimensions in religious vocalisation. In beatboxing, performers take delight in a material-technological-human loop, simulating such tympanic and rhythmic properties that have elicited censorious responses in religious contexts and cultural discourse. My argument in this article is not that BA avoided the still powerful cultural schema that associate through the voice the human interior with a God-given soul, but rather that through their vocal dexterity they played with such schema in ways that elicited, manipulated and heightened affective responses. As I will explore in the

following sections, the ability to ‘touch’ the audience both physiologically and affectively in
FHMM as part of the monster’s story led to felt and ambiguous moments of live creation and
otherness themselves infused with cyborgian practices that left traces in the bodies of
audience members. Where attitudes to the other are modelled by the young performers, and
where audiences participate through call-and-response and bodily movement, a pleasure in
and embrace of otherness became possible.

**FHMM: ‘It’s alive’.**

I now turn to BA’s live performance of FHMM to explore
how the performers deployed vocal technique to tell the story of the monster’s creation and to
make a social commentary, played out live in my own embodied responses. BA’s starting
point, *Frankenstein*, imagines the consequences of scientific exploration into the nature and
source of electricity, a substance, like sound, that points to the continuities between the
biologically human and physical world that humans inhabit. Written when Shelley was
eighteen, in the wake of electrical experimentation on body parts in the early nineteenth
century by Luigi Galvini, it tells the story of a creature assembled from dead matter and
brought to life by the novel’s protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, by passing electricity through
it. The novel’s ‘monster’ (as Shelley’s ‘creature’ has come to be popularly known) was
excluded by Donna Haraway from a proudly hybrid cyborgian identity by its own desire for
completion in conjugal union. The novel itself however has been seen as a channel for
cultural anxieties, hopes and fears regarding acts of creation and technological change, ‘a
versatile frame for interpreting our relation with technology’, and a cyborgian myth that seems
ever more relevant as science advances.\(^4^4\) Recently it inspired, for example, Jeanette
Winterson’s *Frankissstein* (2019), which addresses contemporary concerns around gender
fluidity and Artificial Intelligence. BA’s version belongs to the many recyclings of the novel
as a ‘social metaphor’;\(^4^5\) the collective used its characters and themes as a jumping off point
for sequences that deal with social realities immediately relevant to their own lives. On the
occasions I saw the show, the young performers conformed to a familiar ‘street’ aesthetic,
positioned around a Gothically darkened set, sitting or leaning on huge amplifier boxes.
Dressed in the hoodie gear preferred by many people for its comfort and convenience but

\(^{4^4}\) Jon Turney, *Frankenstein’s Footsteps: Science, Genetics and Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale

\(^{4^5}\) Lester D. Friedman and Allison B. Kavey, *Monstrous Progeny* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2016), 2.
which at the time of the show had come to be viewed by some as in recent years become ‘a highly politicised and racialised item of apparel’.  

FHMM explored the show would explore the damaging consequences of social stigmatisation. By combining the aesthetics of hip hop culture and Gothic excess through manipulations of sound, light and darkness, it would enable the audience to undergo felt experiences of creation, othering and being together. As I will discuss in what follows, the thrills created by Beatbox Academy ultimately dispelled the sense of social threat implied in its source material, encouraging an enlightened and open sociality between all audience members.

Approaching liveness here, as I described above in the introductory section, as the play of physical and affective impulses and responses in the bodies that stage perception, I want now to track a sequence in FHMM which sent pulses and shivers through my body. In this part of the show, where the BA performers staged the monster’s creation in a liminal space of acousmatic sound, sending pulses and shivers through my body. The sequence deployed many of the techniques described above to work a ‘crowd’, manipulating the beats and elements of beatbox and other hip hop practices. Immediately preceding this creation sequence, a fast-paced multivocal track, announced by the performer known as Aminita, ‘It’s a rave. I’m serious!’, had quickened my pulse, and deployed many of the techniques identified by Henriques to work a ‘crowd’. With other members of the audience, my body was rhythmically and affectively stimulated by a combination of whipped up, accelerating beats, layered melodies and multiple sonic effects. The speed threatened to career out of control, generating a frenzied euphoria, and prompting the majority of audience members including me to stand and dance. At the climax, I joined in the huge cheer from the excited crowd. After our exertions, the performers’ loudly amplified heaving breaths began to slow, and became more deliberate, a significant change in pace and volume focussing my attention back onto the stage and story. I became aware of a new amplified sound, that of a soft thud, the familiar upbeat and downbeat rhythm recognisable as that of the human heart. The sound drew me in, the rhythmic beat fundamental to human life, giving me a sense of suspension in


47 My description tracks my experience and recording of the show performed by Aminita, Glitch, WIZ-RD, Native, ABH and Grove at the Traverse, August 6, 2019.
time. I felt my own bodily rhythms begin to synchronise with that of the performers’ amplified breathing, the simulated sonic heartbeat heightening my own.

As the auditorium and stage darkened, Aminita began a spoken narrative voiceover, her rhythmic words riding the beat, ‘From the mouth to the tongue to the teeth to the lungs the air comes in (sound of performers inhaling), and makes you one with your surroundings. Grounding your soul.’ At this point, I realised the story had reached the critical moment, the lyrics drawing attention to the moment of creation as well as to my own bodily processes. My pulse quickened again. ‘The air comes in (performers inhaling)….and makes you born again. Breathe out (performers exhaling).’ I too followed her instructions, as if Aminita was including me in her address to ‘you’. ‘Breath is life’, her voiceover continued, ‘Death is its absence….’. By now, the performers were dispersed around the stage, their faces and bodies for the most part barely moving and hidden in the gloom. Only the sound of their amplified voices animated the auditorium. Made aware of the mortal and ethical stakes of the moment, I felt a rapt attention: ‘Ideas strangle you like a boa constrictor, until the guilt of potential repercussions turns you lifeless and blue and limp. (Faster) ‘It’s almost like falling in love again. (Very fast) It’s like falling in love with the chemical reaction within the synapses within your brain and the adrenaline –’ Here, a huge intake of breath by the other performers cut the voiceover off. (Silence). Held on an in-breath, I waited, aware that the moment of creation was imminent. (An exhalation). And then, low in the mix, the steady beeping of a hospital life support monitor, a sign of a fragile life, accompanied by a soft, building breathing. From this came a layered soundscape, a deep pulsing machine-like base-line pitched low, textured with high hat ‘tees’, steady clicks, and vocalised melodies, arising in a slow-tempo spine-tingling multi-voiced harmony of voices. To my enchanted ear, a complex, living organism appeared to be moving as a pulsing sonic entity, a new being blending the textures of synthesised and amplified sound and held in a space and time by the breathing and beating hearts of my own body and the bodies of audience members around me. A lovely, haunting lyrical melody emerged, continuing to tell the story of the genesis, ‘Breathing. Feeling. Seeing is believing. Breathing (Beat). It’s alive.’ The last syllable of this melody fell deeply, diving down to the low base that is associated in the semiotics of sound with non-human being, and vibrating uncannily in me. Faint whirrings and wheezings were also audible in the rhythmic apparatus emerging from the sonic space of the auditorium, and extended in time by the reverberation added at the sound desk. A shiver ran through me, a
moment of frisson, accompanied by the sense that this new being, collectively experienced, was not fully human, despite the human breath that sustained it. 48

The moment of birthing however, experienced in my body and those of others present, had now also become a moment of othering. Not a ‘he’, ‘she’ or they’ had been created, but an ‘it’, alien, separate and unknown. For Nicholas Ridout, the darkness of the theatre and isolation of performer and audience member facilitates a process of ‘mutual becoming-for-others’. 49 A tremor in the body of the audience answers the vibration created in theatre by the ‘shudder’ of the actor’s body as it becomes something to be seen by another, or a represented object. In FHMM, the bodies of the performers were in this sequence shrouded in darkness as they retreated upstage into the shadows. Through their vocalic projection, and in a shared physiological and imaginative projection, the ‘vocalic body’ of the monster came into being. 50 Breathing, the conjured monster was felt as human, but never solidified, a fleeting ambivalent presence existing ‘as a shifting property in the theatre air’. 51 Its ‘body’, like those of the performers, remained unseen, throwing more emphasis onto the synchronised perceptions that took place as it came into being in the imaginations and physiological experiences of audience members. Though it could be felt partly inside and partly outside of all of the bodies present, this presence consisted in sounds that resonated with the powers of machines. If ‘it’ was other, it was born of our bodies, in conjunction with technologies that integrate with and extend the human beyond its normal capacities. In this case the ‘shudder’ of ‘becoming-for-others’ did not materialise or reify a body visually, but was felt by bodies as a cyborgian event, collectively and physiologically staged, and made fleetingly audible by the fusion of vocal apparatus with the wires, plastics and metals of technical equipment.

If the creation of the monster, collectively breathed into life, raises questions regarding the responsibilities of society towards its creations, FHMM as a whole made an implicit analogy between the experience of othering that the monster undergoes in the novel and those which occur in contemporary society. Moving on from the scene of creation, the performers

50 Connor, Dumbstruck, p. 36.
explored the violent processes of objectification using the bright lights of theatre. Staging the struggle between creator and monster through the conventions of a Beatbox battle in the next sequence, the monster was visually represented by the bodies of the young performers as they pretended to be a hideously deformed four-headed creature. Brightly illuminated, the performers’ faces and mouths, in this sequence clearly visible, gurned in a parody of a crude and jokey act of representation. In one song sequence, ‘Hashtag hideous’, the performers turned a stage lamp on the audience, cheekily addressing the kind of spiteful comments found on social media at individuals exposed to and good humouredly shuddering in its objectifying glare. At other moments in the narrative, the playful creators doubled as shadowy ‘othered’ bodies, fleetingly present in their vocal projection, but not fully visible. As the monster’s story progressed, a figure dimly materialised in the hooded shape of a young man, whose problems, it became apparent, were symptomatic of an alienation caused by social failures. Here, the collective made social commentary through an identification of the young man and the monster, both alone and spurned by their creators in an indifferent world. In his cloak of darkness, and singing a low, sad, single melody, this was a deeply empathetic figure. In other numbers, devised from the performers’ own experiences, the ‘critical voice’ bell hooks hears in rap music was apparent, integrating the ‘explaining, demanding, urging’ voices of the young performers as they conveyed their social critique in rap and spoken word sequences. Overall, FHMM provided a commentary on the making of and being a monster in the light of contemporary issues and processes of social disconnection, othering and exclusion, and on the disavowal by society of responsibility for its offspring.

A cyborgian social

The moment of auditory hallucination and haunting beauty that I described above (p. XX) of the monster’s creation was for me alive with both imaginative possibility and affective charge. Infused with the ‘tummy-lurching’, ‘breath taking’ sense of thrill, as documented in the reviews I quoted above, the shiver it produced in me contrasted with the warmth, energy and sense of inclusivity generated by the participatory gig-theatre style framing of FHMM to which I turn to in this final section. This suggested a circulation of energies and model of being with others that has wider implications for the ‘integrated circuitry’ of British theatre.

52 bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 27.
Rather than observing the familiar convention at the professional theatre that a play starts without introduction or preamble, the performance of FHMM was topped and tailed by brightly lit interactive sessions led by Murray in the role of MC. In these sessions, Murray framed the show as an ongoing participatory project of which the audience that night was a part, making clear that the ‘relaxed’ behaviour (now adopted by BAC for all its shows) was more than acceptable. Chatting and dancing, making photos or videos on phones, moving around the auditorium: all were welcome forms of behaviour and engagement. Such relaxations of theatre etiquette, Murray told me in my interview with him, were part of the BA’s ethos of inclusivity, its acknowledgement that to remain alive, theatre must adapt to diverse needs and expectations of audience members. At the Traverse, before FHMM began, some opening numbers had been presented with participants from Edinburgh’s Leith Academy, with whom BA members had worked prior to the run in the Traverse. This opening section had been enthusiastically received by audience members. Convening the final section as if it were one big BA participatory session, Murray divided the whole audience into groups, inviting us to try out beatboxing vocal technique in a ‘call and response’ session. This antiphonal format belongs to the long-practised tradition descended from African vocal traditions, and resonates through African American musical genres from gospel to hip-hop. For musicologist Michael Dowdy, it plays an important role in smaller hip hop venues in jointly producing a space of interactive engagement in which dominant cultural values are contested. Making the basic beatboxing sounds, ‘Boom-Tee-Cla’, the majority of audience members responded together to Murray’s calls, feeling each other’s embodied presence through the sounds of bodies massed and resonating together. This was a chance also to explore vocally the space of the auditorium, and the relations it orchestrated with others, especially with the slight delay in the sound as it bounced off surfaces and was affected by the amplification system. To me, this felt like a much larger and more complex version of the tuning in that I had witnessed during the circle jam when I visited BA in Battersea.

In the beatbox demo that followed, the BA performers played with the form, visibly enjoying themselves, as Murray worked with them to build up and quicken the textures of sounds, stopping and starting the performance abruptly, both amazing us with a display of virtuosity, and physiologically building our experiences of suspense and excitement again through rhythmic play. In these sections, the young performers’ hoodies read as a team strip, rather than a sign of delinquency, suggesting a sense of belonging and shared identity. As the energy ramped up, audience members moved and swayed together, some of them using the distinctive chopping, crisscrossing hand gestures that often accompany a hip hop beat. I turned to look, smile at and laugh with people on either side of me, our bodies animated with a dynamic cultural practice whose presence has increased that has in recent years been becoming gradually more present in British theatre auditoria since the late 2010s. It felt as if there was a huge sea of people, transformed from a listening audience, to a ‘crowd’ sensing, moving and dancing together. We were a circuit where the performers and audience were ‘reffecting’ each other with the joy that is associated with a spontaneous urge for dancing. As one critic put it, ‘Traverse 1 becomes a rave’.

The palpable circulation of rhythmical energies through vocal percussion, as with other musical performance, ‘touches’ and opens the listener both to non-normative and to collective, joyful experiences. In The Cultural Politics of Emotions (2004), Sara Ahmed returns to Descartes in thinking through the relationships between bodily sensations, emotion and judgement. Ahmed seeks to understand the motions of affect culturally, relating the way that affect operates on the surfaces of bodies to produce affective norms that enforce social structures such as inclusion and exclusion. Though the majority of her book deals with the circulation of negative affects such as shame and hatred, she writes briefly on pleasure, arguing that ‘queer pleasure’ has traditionally been outside existing heteronormative ‘circuits of exchange’. ‘When bodies touch’, she argues, ‘and give pleasure to bodies that have been barred from contact, then those bodies are reshaped’.

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56 See Ana Pais, ‘Re-Affecting the Stage: Affective Resonance as the Function of the Audience’, Humanities 5:79 (2016); and Vuilleumier and Trost, 216.
with others has been policed by the dominant bourgeois norms of British theatre. The conviviality that the BA generates overrides the conventions of hushed and still behaviour of audience members, each politely confined to a single seat, and arranged according to price of purchase. Its sonic, vibrational and rhythmic touch circulates a sort of ‘queer pleasure’.

Ahmed teases out the way that touch is related to our sense of the other who touches: ‘To be touched in a certain way,’ she argues in an encounter with another which may involve ‘a reading not only of that encounter, but of the other that is encountered as having certain characteristics’ (original emphasis). The affective responses generated in encounters with others, for Ahmed are thus ‘readings’ that ‘not only create the borders between selves and others, but also “give” others meaning and value’.  

Taking a cue from Ahmed then, the rhythmic touch of music, the impulse to move it creates, and the encounters it produces between friends and strangers can help to unfix the conventional ideas it is possible to make of others, especially when we perceive them as different from ourselves. This argument finds support in the musicology of rhythm, where researchers have found evidence that the physiological stimulus of rhythmic sound affects the ways in which people understand and relate to each other. For me, the bodily motion and pleasure propagated by the BA collective through their musical practice communed bodies normally managed by the atomising dynamics that have tended to operate in British theatre. Their electrifying, playful and dexterous modes of performance radically altered the sonic and haptic textures of the auditorium, charging audiences with energy that coursed through bodies, and convened the ‘crowd’ into what Henriques terms a ‘collective subject’ (emphasis original), in which the ‘epidermal envelope’ of individual subjectivity is breached and replaced by an ‘open, fluid and multiple whole’. While the BA moved with us as this resuscitated collective body, revivified and joyful, connecting its members more intensely and more joyfully, they also established material and affective lines of connection with non-human substances and digital mechanisms, and wired into wider circulations of affect and ideas.

59 Ahmed, Cultural Politics, 28.
To conclude by returning to Haraway, she defines and explores ‘social reality’ as ‘lived social relations’. Her manifesto recommends a pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and bringing together those who are not related to each other in ‘fission impossible’.\textsuperscript{62} It has been my argument here that \textit{FHMM} brought about such a shift in social relations in audience members on both occasions that I attended the show. Both the virtuosity and adept dramaturgy of \textit{FHMM} demonstrated the collective’s cultural knowledge and skill, placing its young members in a position of critical commentators, with powers to change perceptions and activate alternative ways of being together. As Haraway puts it, ‘taking responsibility for the social task of reconstructing the boundaries of everyday life’ means embracing ‘the skillful task’ of doing this ‘in partial connection with others, in communication with all our parts’.\textsuperscript{63} BA’s young performers in this way acted as agents with potential to transform systems, spaces and institutions, and the sociocultural norms that operate in them, their work offering to loop the audience into a circuit powered with pleasure and energy. The cyborgian social generated by BA of which I was a part was an intense experience, and its residues of joy were powerful for me. In the psychophysiology of music, scientists find it is possible to develop a ‘dopaminergic anticipation’ for the return of musical pleasure.\textsuperscript{64} For Henriques, the pleasure of the ‘vibes’ is ‘tangible, all-consuming and contagious’.\textsuperscript{65} As I have argued, through embodied sharing of beatboxing and hip hop practices, audience members become a ‘crowd’. In an asynchronous sense this crowd is part of an integrated circuit that extends not only to their immediate neighbours in the theatre auditorium, but out beyond to people in bedrooms, schools, streets and sites where beatboxing and other hip-hop practices are frequently practiced, and which loops theatre audiences into the practices of protest and critique, and discourses of injustice that preoccupy contemporary grime and hip hop performers. Though theatre scholars are often cautious in claiming that what happens in theatre produces no more than a temporary glitch in social relations, I, for one, am eager that an increasingly ‘monsterised’ theatre will continue to be inclusive of these integrating, inclusive and extending practices.

\textsuperscript{62} Haraway, \textit{Cyborg}, 5-16.
\textsuperscript{63} Haraway, \textit{Cyborg}, 67.
\textsuperscript{64} Harrison and Loui, ‘Thrills’, 5.
\textsuperscript{65} Henriques, ‘Vibrations’, 67.
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“It’s Alive”**: Towards a Monsterized Theatre with Beatbox Academy’s *Frankenstein: How to Make a Monster* (2018 - )

Electrifying gig. Thrilling theatre. Tongue-twisting vocal gymnastics. Mary Shelley’s original, re-imagined with songs, soundscapes and sonic trickery. Experience the power of the human voice breathing life into monsters all around us. Frankenstein will leave you asking: who are the monsters we fear? Who created them? And how the hell did they just do that with their voices?!f

Description, Edinburgh Fringe Online Programme, 2019. ¹

Following successful runs at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in London in 2018 and 2019, *Frankenstein: How to Make a Monster* (*FHMM*) was performed in the Traverse Theatre in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2019 by a diverse collective of young people from Beatbox Academy (BA). As an audience member, the atmosphere created by this award-winning hip hop version of Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818), which had been devised as part of the BA participatory project at BAC, felt electrifying.² The show, which used beatboxing blended with other vocal practices such as rap, MC-ing and melodic singing, engaged with serious subject matter, and unleashed feelings of admiration, goodwill and pleasure. After the performance, I observed people leaving the auditorium energised and excited, experiencing a wave of affect that was carried into on-line reviews. One audience member noted the ‘infectious energy’ and ‘endless generosity’ of the performers, another commented how the show ‘burst with youthful energy’, and on its galvanising effects: ‘at the end of our show the audience literally all jumped up at once’. It was as if the ‘monsters’ identified by the young performers in their adaption of the novel, social ills that included acts of irresponsible creation, cultural cruelty and othering, were temporarily vanquished. Professional reviewers were awestruck by the ‘staggering’ talent and ‘gorgeous’ singing of the BA collective, showering the award-winning show with five-star reviews. Words such as ‘empowerment’,

² *FHMM* won Off-West and Total Theatre Awards in 2019, and was a British Council showcase in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was co-directed by Conrad Murray and David Cumming.
‘confidence’ and ‘joy’ studded the warm, heartfelt responses. Many referred to a physical, almost visceral response, to alterations in bodily mechanisms, ‘This is an old story made electrically alive. Let it take your breath away’. It will ‘make your tummy lurch’. \(^3\) Reading the reviews a sense of animation emerges of a collective audience body, shocked and electrified by currents of surprise and pleasure, a battery of voices buzzing long enough to document their experiences of thrill, excitement and joy.

Examining the practices and processes deployed by the young performers of the BA collective in the making of FHMM, this article explores the capacity of beatboxing to generate rhythmic connections between bodies and materials, creating the sense of ‘electrification’, ‘liveness’ and ‘aliveness’ reflected in the above responses, and contributing to the new meanings generated by the adaptation of an old story. In seeking to respond to the growing prevalence of ‘gig’ forms in British theatre that combine theatrical, musical and technological practices in ways that I suggest nuance and enhance rather than diminish the ‘usual virtues’ of live theatre, \(^4\) it links to ongoing explorations in performance studies of the animation of sociality through the heightening of sensory engagement and transmission of affect, as well as looking to musicologists to explore the vocal percussion techniques deployed by the BA. Not wishing to simply recirculate clichés around “‘the magic of live theatre’”, \(^5\) I approach the ‘liveness’ of performance as a set of energies, techniques and powers that are informed by the lived and artistic experience of performers, animated through musical and participatory practices, mediated in performance by sound, breath, blood, plastics, and electronic equipment, and sensed in the bodies of audience members.

In assembling my critical components, I adapt an image used in Donna Haraway’s ‘The Cyborg Manifesto’ of an ‘integrated circuit’, itself seized by Haraway from the work of second wave feminist Rachel Grossman where it was used to examine the use of management techniques to regulate the labour and behaviour of Malaysian women within the global electronics industry. \(^6\) Here, I am following Haraway in deploying the phrase metaphorically.

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\(^3\) These comments are taken from on-line print media reviews hosted by The Stage, Exeunt, The Times, The Guardian, WhatsonStage and Edfringe of the productions of FHMM at BAC (March 2018) and the Traverse (August 2019). [ALL PRINT MEDIA, WAS THE INTERNET BLOG RESPONSE DIFFERENT?]

\(^4\) Dan Rebellato, Theatre & Globalization (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 41.


\(^6\) Donna Haraway, Manifestly Haraway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) [1985], 37.
to explore artistic, musical and technological practices in contemporary British theatre and its industrial context. Perceptions of this context have been marked by its historical associations with ‘high’ culture, its perpetuation of ‘closed’ and ‘exclusive’ circuits of opportunity and labour, its circulation of ideology through literary and text-based forms of theatre, and a practice of spectatorship based in motionless attention. I am exploring how the ‘integrated circuitry’ of British theatre might be rewired and extended through musical forms that ignite affect, stimulate more unruly and inclusive audiences, and open the industry to wider performance ecologies resonating with diverse cultural traditions and sociocultural practices. In addressing a musical form that has entered British theatre, this article resists familiar discourses and narratives that racialize or simplify hip hop culture, or denigrate incursions of popular or sensory aspects of musical performance. Rather it seeks to engage with a piece of British ‘gig theatre’ that along with others such as Debris Stevenson’s Poet in da Corner (2018), Arinzé Kene’s Misty (2018), and Middle Child’s Canary and the Crow (2020), have in the late 2010s and early 2020s deployed hip hop styles such as rap and grime to realise musical dramaturgies as a mode of storytelling in a range of UK fringe, subsidised and commercial theatres. I argue that the experience and energy of young voices, empowered through vocal technologies and musical form, and made present through the participatory practices of the BA, provide a catalyst for a reanimated theatre public. I understand the performers of FHMM as agents of ‘liveness’ who deploy vibrant sonic and rhythmical practices as skilful dramaturgical strategies that convey narrative and meaning viscerally, and which stimulate the circulation of joyful and exhilarating affect.

As part of my exploration of the sonorous, rhythmic and animating storytelling of FHMM, I am interested in the ways that technologies of voice, music, and sound amplification integrate and regulate bodies, materials and technologies in pleasurable and/or transgressive ways. This article will consider not only BA’s creative embodied practices but also its use of amplifiers and microphones, the latter a technology dubbed by a veteran theatre maker in industry newspaper, The Stage, a ‘monster of theatre’. Though such technologies are relatively newly legitimised in British venues known largely for text-based theatre and continue to meet resistance from professionals who favour the ‘natural’ projection of the voice, their integration, along with digitised vocal sound, is part of a current wave of

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7 Barrie Rutter in Giverny Masso, ‘Barrie Rutter: Microphone use is the ‘monster of theatre’”, The Stage, November 14, 2019, 5.
experimentation in the staging of ‘sonic socialities and subjectivities’ noted by Salomé Voegelin. Not only do sound technologies open and amplify dramaturgical possibilities, they point to the more diverse range of social and cultural contexts through which vocal and embodied practices are reaching the theatre. In exploring ‘cyborgian’ aspects of vocal performance, and its illusionary, uncanny or estranging effects, it has been helpful to refer to the work of the ‘first generation of voice studies scholars’ who have explored properties of voices largely in relation to European traditions of cultural schema. It has also been necessary and illuminating to recognise the diverse cultural genealogies of musical and sonic dramaturgies that have informed the development of beatboxing and other hip hop practices. In particular, I have been influenced by the fieldwork of Julian Henriques on the outdoors dancehalls of Kingston Jamaica and its ‘crowd’ (the preferred local term for audience), who attend the dancehall nights for the ‘pleasure of the “vibes”’. Henriques advances a ‘vibration model’ which suggests how affect is expressed and propagated rhythmically through corporeal, material and sociocultural media. His research demonstrates how the use of heavy amplified base heights the ‘whole-body vibrotactile experience’ generated by amplified musical ‘vibes’. This is relevant to beatbox performance, where the human voice imitates the rhythmic beats of machines, where technologies of sound electronically convert, enhance, and amplify the sonic pulse, and where amplified electronic vibrations are the medium of the crowd’s haptic experience.

In this article, I frequently document my sensations and observations as a researcher and member of the crowd. My aim is to deploy a methodology that uses my own embodied responses to acknowledge the energies and affects that passed into and through my body as I encountered BA’s devising processes and the staged musical performance of FHMM. This is to follow critical approaches from musicology such as that of Henriques, and also from performance scholarship that tracks affective or embodied responses of audiences. Dugal McKinnon, for example, describes the ‘unnerving and/ or exhilarating’ effect of ‘immersive loudspeaker environments’, where listeners encounter sound ‘in forms of ambiguous

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provenance, heard in the absence of visual cues.'

13 His observation points to affective response to perceived distortions of image and sound as a form of ‘live’ corporeal registration. ‘Liveness’ therefore can be at least partly reconstituted as a ‘listener-determined’ phenomenon that attends to the play of physical and affective impulses and responses in the bodies that stage perception.14 In adapting this approach I use my verbal interpretations of ‘feeling and sensing’ as a methodological tool that accepts the interrelationality of bodies and things, which enables me to explore affective, rhythmic and temporal sensations, and to address the social relations orchestrated between and experienced by performers and audiences. 15 Exploring my own response to the rhythmic element of beatboxing and the way that its manipulation allows performers to intervene in a listener’s perception and understanding of time has been a crucial element in my critical pursuit of ‘liveness’. As performance scholar Luciano Mariti argues, “the ‘temporal “quality”’ particular to performance is drawn from the ‘actor-spectator relationship: a “living” relationship’” that ‘draws upon the “forces” of time’.16 These are points to which I will return in my explorations of beatboxing (see p. XX), whose temporal and material pulses suggest circuitry that links the human and the electronic. For Conrad Murray, co-founder and artistic director of BA, the ‘liveness’ of performance emerges as moments of interaction with audience members who might otherwise be detached by the deadening effects of the fourth wall in performance and the dominant edict in the majority of theatres for audiences to be quiet and still.17 Following Murray’s pedagogies and values, beatboxing dramaturgy becomes a live rewiring of theatrical spaces and systems.

**Beatbox Academy**

Beatbox Academy (BA) based at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) uses beatboxing as the central artistic practice of its grassroots participatory performance project. It has grown out of a South London context where beatboxing is one of a range of hip hop influenced performance practices.

practices that includes garage and grime music, the latter a culturally influential form of
music making and political critique in the UK. Beatboxing itself is a form of vocal percussion
that emerged as part of the hip hop scene in urban centres in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s
when proponents started to imitate the sounds of electronic drum machines (beatboxes). It is
now practised worldwide by people from younger ages and upwards in every day spaces,
such as bedrooms, streets, and schools, as well as in music clubs and in commercialised
global championships. In musicology, scholars have located beatboxing within
universalistic or evolutionary narratives that regard vocal percussion as a form of human
music making, but also point to it as an art form that emerges specifically through histories of
black performance that go back to the to the foot stomping and hand clapping ‘ring shout’ of
African slaves in American colonies. For communications anthropologist Tok Thompson,
beatboxing negotiates ‘a new sort of man-and-machine type of identity, a synthesis between
human and computer’. As one of a range of vocal practices associated with hip hop,
beatboxing remains affiliated with a socially conscious subcultural resistance, and the ‘global
hood’, a shifting site of contemporary transnational exchange. Practitioners often also use
or collaborate with spoken word or rap performers, incorporating politicised commentary on
issues such as racial and economic inequality. Its often self-taught, cut-and paste DIY
aesthetic allows its practitioners to sample and cite other artists’ sounds and rhythms, and by
doing this make affiliations that contribute to their development as artists connected with a
much wider cultural and industrial ‘circuitry’ that extends across the world, and from which
traditional mainstream text-based theatre in the UK has remained largely disconnected.

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BA uses the distinctive beatboxing style as part of an ensemble process of creation and performance for theatrical spaces, integrating into its collective aesthetic common features of hip hop such as moments where performers’ virtuosic skill is spotlighted or where participants contest each other. Unlike more ‘spectacular’ shows such as the commercial success *Hamilton* (2015), whose vibrant music and choreography refers in depth to hip hop histories, the BA draws on traditions of live hip hop performance as an interactive and participatory form, relating with its audience as a community of which it is a part. Due to its participatory approach, where the BA extends its connections through workshops and outreach both locally and to the places to which it tours, audiences will often include many members to whom the performers are personally known. In the BA shows that have taken place at BAC, many of these audience members are family and friends, some of whom attend to support or collect its participants, fitting this in between other caring responsibilities and obligations at work and in domestic life. The project, which began at BAC in 2008, is advertised as a weekly drop-in group for young people and adults. Murray, who grew up on a nearby social housing estate and joined BAC youth theatre groups as a teenager, spoke to me about his own background, ‘I loved listening to music at home, he told me, ‘It was the only thing that made me feel good’. 22 His remark, understood in the context of the difficult circumstances of his home life, suggests complex relations between pleasure, talent, and opportunity for individuals within disadvantaged economic, social and cultural contexts. 23 His inclusive approach to participation in the BA provides a platform of co-creation and collective pleasure in music making, but also supports the development of artistic and economic opportunities for the members of the collective. The devising of *FHMM*, for example, was partly conceived as a means of gaining paid work for its members, some of whom face challenges that include extreme economic precarity, mental health issues and homelessness.

On the evening I visited a BA participatory session at the BAC in London following its Edinburgh run, the group was diverse in terms of age (despite the advertised cap of 30), race, ability and gender, and included participants with autism and learning needs. The session began with participants in a ‘circle jam’, a base activity, used by Murray in sessions before the introduction of any microphone work. In a jam, one participant starts by vocally

22 Murray, interview.
improvising a rhythmic base line from the foundation sounds of beatboxing, ‘Boom-Tee-Cla’ that onomatopoeically mimic the sounds of base and snare drums, and hi-hat cymbals. 24 This is known as ‘pitching’, a process that does not happen in relation to the notes specified in the music scales of the classical music tradition, but allows a participant, whether formally trained in music or not, to provide a percussive ‘ground’ on which other participants vocally weave and layer. As I observed the BA session, participants built on the base pitch, each adding their own sounds, melodies and beats, as well as using ‘sampled’ fragments and tag lines from well-known hip hop tracks, ‘I’ve got the power’ and ‘Ready or not’. The sense of ‘pitch’ used in the circle jam is close to the word’s meaning as ‘hurl’ or ‘throw’, as if the vocal sound sent out is a rhythmic energy for others to catch and to which they attune. As Murray explained, ‘Whoever starts that first note or beat, we’ll go on that tempo…’ In this way, the activity could be understood as a kind of co-composition in time, a continuous interchange of ideas, in which leadership becomes fluid and alternating as in a chamber ensemble or jazz band where information is shared.25 A collective perception seemed to be present, such as that identified by music educators in the shared intentionality of group music making.26 Together the participants seemed to create a moving sculpture of sounds that arose and fell in the room, reaching across and up into its high ceilings, a space that seemed transformed to me by this event of collective sonic imagination. Reflecting on the session afterwards, I thought of the circle jam as a form of artistic heightening of the sonorous interrelations between human beings explored by philosopher Adriana Cavarero, relations embodied and intensified by voices taking a ‘vital pleasure’ in revealing their own unique textures in communication with others.27

Later in the session, some of the young participants continued to improvise, now using microphones and electronic sound amplification to experiment with highly energised rhythmic clicks, riffs and deep guttural machine-like sounds. Their performance became both intensely concentrated, and gloriously hedonistic, as they wound each other up to beatbox with ever more intensity, volume and speed. At this point, the experiences of pleasure and

enhanced spatial awareness that I had experienced in hearing the circle jam were nuanced
with sensations that were both compelling and disorientating. The addition of microphones
had allowed voices to be thrown further, altering the relations of the performers with their
own voice, and with me the witness and listener. Standing with the performers behind me, I
experienced a sense of spatial distortion as the sounds bombarded me from the speakers
angled downwards in front of me, causing my own body to vibrate, and eliciting there a
rhythmic response in spite of the somewhat uncanny sensation. Later, I realised I had been
experiencing what is known in biomusicology as ‘entrainment’ – where auditory input
carrying rhythmic stimulus results in involuntary movements in the body of the listener. 28
Drawn in by the young performers’ concentrated and spontaneous beats, I had felt suspended
in time, magnetised, partly at the mercy of their astonishing vocal play. This, and the
impression given by the buzzing, sparking and fizzing of the beatboxing sounds of something
mechanical or electronic had given me the uncanny sensation that something non-human
were at play. The addition of the microphones had not diminished my pleasure but had
changed its character, wiring in my body rhythmically, charging it with the vibes coursing
with the beatboxers’ electronically amplified sounds. After staying to chat with the
performers, I left the session with a warm, uplifted feeling of social contact, with the energy
of the amplified beats still ringing in my ears. My curiosity had been stirred by the BA’s
joyful, self-extending and sociable practice, and its ability to get under my skin, making a
live and lingering ‘vibrotactile experience’, that affected both my body and mind.

‘Sonic trickery’ / rhythmic resonance

The participatory processes of BA described above, draw out sound and rhythm from
performers’ bodies, establishing embodied, integrated relations through collaborative musical
composition, and draw in listeners through live physical and affective experiences of musical
listening. I turn in this section to a consideration of how beatboxing also produces liveness
through processes that provoke ideas of bodily transgression, intervention or disturbance,
which become triggers for affective response. This article explores the sense, following
Haraway, in which beatbox performance might form a kind of ‘cyborgian circuitry’, a
knitting together of human and machine that is both ‘potent and taboo’, a kind of ‘rejoicing’

28 See Patrick Vuilleumier and Wiebke Trost, ‘Music and emotions: from enchantment to
in ‘illegitimate fusion’. The term ‘cyborgian’, used from the 1960s according to the OED, refers to a person whose capacities are ‘extended beyond normal human limitations by a machine or other external agency that modifies the body’s functioning’. Alternatively, a cyborg is ‘an integrated man-machine system’. It follows that in order to qualify as cyborgian, the performative practice of beatboxing must involve the physical integration of human and machine, or an extension of bodily capacities. Although Dan Stowell and Mark D. Plumbley characterise beatboxing as an art of ‘illusion’, ‘impersonation’ and ‘imitation’, it is clear from their fascinating elucidation of vocal percussion techniques that the imaginative motor ignition in beatboxing of sonic, electronic and rhythmic energy expands the narrow and normative range of sound produced by humans that serve normal language-based vocalisations. In fact, as with other forms of vocal training, the vocal techniques that beatboxing demands can distinctively alter human anatomy. Even breathing is modified: performers, who can sometimes produce beats and melodic sounds simultaneously, learn to produce non-verbal sounds on in-breaths, making inhaled sounds such as the ‘inward clap snare, enabling a continuous flow of sounds and beats’. Such practices intervene in the respiratory mechanism, enhancing the potency and strangeness of performers, their bodies to some extent ‘synched’ through creative imitation to electronic rather than ‘natural’ or ‘human’ sounds and rhythms.

It is arguably in its key rhythmic dimension where the integration in beatboxing of wo/man and machine is most potent. For Raymond Williams, whose scholarship is alive to the structures of feelings in lived encounters, ‘rhythm is a way of transmitting a description of experience, in such a way that the experience is re-created in the person receiving it’. This is ‘more than metaphor’, but a ‘physical experience as real as any other’ that is effected ‘on the blood, on the breathing, on the physical patterns of the brain’. Williams’ remarks, which in

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29 Haraway, 57.
some ways anticipate neuroscientific understanding that has developed since the 1990s, are made as part of his wider discussion of the ‘vital descriptive effort’ made in human communication, and the ‘powerful means’ that artists possess of achieving it. In this light, the simulation by beatboxers through onomatopoeic performance of electronically generated rhythmic beats and other sounds, suggests a material connection between human and ‘non-human’ actors that is powerfully physically and artistically shared in performance with the bodies of other humans. Rather than producing the deadening expressionlessness and automated obedience however that has sometimes been associated with ‘inhuman’ digital or metronomic beats, beatboxing drives an expressiveness that is inevitably de-regularised and enhanced artistically by the human body. In beatboxing sounds and rhythms are accelerated and decelerated, temporarily paused, or ‘mixed’ with sounds of back beat cutting and record scratching. These sounds refer to a repertoire of techniques resonating with many contexts where sound technologies have been manipulated – such as at the outdoor dancehalls described by Henriques where MCs use the ‘rewind’ or ‘pull up’- to build affective impact in the crowd. Such techniques can be considered as vocal and auditory versions of the ‘visible cuts, pauses and blackouts’ that according to Mariti generate a felt sense of dynamicity and duration in theatre, and which heighten excitement and pleasurable tension. These rhythmic and sonic arts manipulate the crowd’s sense of suspension, and elicit embodied and affective response. For Mariti, the process of ‘embodied simulation’ is not ‘automatic’ but ‘resonant’ behaviour, and a stimulation of ‘dramaturgical competence’ through ‘body-to-body’ contact. Applied to hip hop crowds, the animation and pleasure experienced through beatboxing’s rhythmic manipulation is a resonance of the performers’ joy and embrace of the beat that is felt in auditory and haptic modes. I am arguing here that the BA performers, in their hedonistic play, pass sounds, sensations and bodily energies into theatre space, creating social relations that are orchestrated according to the rhythms of bodies which are themselves inspired by and resonating with the embodied echoes and energies of machines.

36 Paul Théberge, ‘Click / Beat / Body’, p.346.
37 Henriques, ‘Vibrations’, 64.
As I hope will be becoming clear, beatboxing derives some of its potency from its capacity to perform sound in ways that challenge understandings of human ontology and bodily mechanisms. Further, its use of microphones brings into play the relations between the visible and auditory in our understanding of the human subject. Brandon LaBelle argues that "The mouth functions to figure and sustain the body as a subject, a subject within a network of relations." (emphasis original). Whereas in conventional vocal performance the mouth tends to remain clearly visible as the source of vocal sound, in beatboxing, the microphone is often held so close to the mouth as to obscure it, semi-covered by the hands in order to produce a bassier effect. To the witness like me, a habitual theatre-goer relatively unversed in beatboxing practice, the technique can be disorientating, enhancing a sensation that the vocal sound produced, in its unfamiliar character and mediation, is not entirely of the body. Such perceived distortions, as cultural theorists have discussed with reference to the acousmatic voice, may elicit powerful affective responses related to specific cultural and religious schema. Mladen Dolar points out, for example, that in many languages the word for 'breath' is etymologically linked to that for spirit, the voice apparently embodying 'the flesh of the soul'. In its intimate 'close-mic' technique, beatboxing disturbs the religious and cultural sense of the soulful human interior. At times in beatboxing, the mouth is bypassed altogether, the microphone positioned near the nose or throat, amplifying what Murray calls the 'sub sounds' of performers' bodies. What becomes audible can be deeply unfamiliar – whirring, clicking or buzzing sounds that suggest a fleshy engineering that is digital, electronic and mechanical rather than divine, and far from the ethereal sounds of chants and psalms which have traditionally suggested spiritual dimensions in religious vocalisation. In beatboxing, performers take delight in a material-technological-human loop, simulating such tympanic and rhythmic properties that have elicited censorious responses in religious contexts and cultural discourse. My argument in this article is not that BA avoided the still powerful cultural schema that associate through the voice the human interior with a God-given soul, but rather that through their vocal dexterity they played with such schema in ways that elicited, manipulated and heightened affective responses. As I will explore in the

following sections, the ability to ‘touch’ the audience both physiologically and affectively in
FHMM as part of the monster’s story led to felt and ambiguous moments of live creation and
otherness themselves infused with cyborgian practices that left traces in the bodies of
audience members. Where attitudes to the other are modelled by the young performers, and
where audiences participate through call-and-response and bodily movement, a pleasure in
and embrace of otherness became possible.

FHMM: ‘It’s alive’.

I now turn to BA’s live performance of FHMM to explore
how the performers deployed vocal technique to tell the story of the monster’s creation and to
make a social commentary, played out live in my own embodied responses. BA’s starting
point, Frankenstein, imagines the consequences of scientific exploration into the nature and
source of electricity, a substance, like sound, that points to the continuities between the
biologically human and physical world that humans inhabit. Written when Shelley was
eighteen, in the wake of electrical experimentation on body parts in the early nineteenth
century by Luigi Galvini, it tells the story of a creature assembled from dead matter and
brought to life by the novel’s protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, by passing electricity through
it. The novel’s ‘monster’ (as Shelley’s ‘creature’ has come to be popularly known) was
excluded by Donna Haraway from a proudly hybrid cyborgian identity by its own desire for
completion in conjugal union. The novel itself however has been seen as a channel for
cultural anxieties, hopes and fears regarding acts of creation and technological change, ‘a
versatile frame for interpreting our relation with technology’, and a cyborgian myth that seems
ever more relevant as science advances. Recently it inspired, for example, Jeanette
Winterson’s Frankissstein (2019), which addresses contemporary concerns around gender
fluidity and Artificial Intelligence. BA’s version belongs to the many recyclings of the novel
as a ‘social metaphor’; the collective used its characters and themes as a jumping off point
for sequences that deal with social realities immediately relevant to their own lives. On the
occasions I saw the show, the young performers conformed to a familiar ‘street’ aesthetic,
positioned around a Gothically darkened set, sitting or leaning on huge amplifier boxes.
Dressed in the hoodie gear preferred by many people for its comfort and convenience but

44 Jon Turney, Frankenstein’s Footsteps: Science, Genetics and Popular Culture (New Haven: Yale
45 Lester D. Friedman and Allison B. Kavey, Monstrous Progeny (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2016), 2.
which at the time of the show had come to be viewed by some as in recent years become ‘a highly politicised and racialised item of apparel’. FHMM explored the show would explore the damaging consequences of social stigmatisation. By combining the aesthetics of hip hop culture and Gothic excess through manipulations of sound, light and darkness, it would enable the audience to undergo felt experiences of creation, othering and being together. As I will discuss in what follows, the thrills created by Beatbox Academy ultimately dispelled the sense of social threat implied in its source material, encouraging an enlightened and open sociality between all audience members.

Approaching liveness here, as I described above in the introductory section, as the play of physical and affective impulses and responses in the bodies that stage perception, I want now to track a sequence in FHMM which sent pulses and shivers through my body. In this part of the show where the BA performers staged the monster’s creation in a liminal space of acousmatic sound, sending pulses and shivers through my body. The sequence deployed many of the techniques described above to work a ‘crowd’, manipulating the beats and elements of beatbox and other hip hop practices. Immediately preceding this creation sequence, a fast-paced multivocal track, announced by the performer known as Aminita, ‘It’s a rave. I’m serious!’, had quickened my pulse, and deployed many of the techniques identified by Henriques to work a ‘crowd’. With other members of the audience, my body was rhythmically and affectively stimulated by a combination of whipped up, accelerating beats, layered melodies and multiple sonic effects. The speed threatened to career out of control, generating a frenzied euphoria, and prompting the majority of audience members including me to stand and dance. At the climax, I joined in the huge cheer from the excited crowd. After our exertions, the performers’ loudly amplified heaving breaths began to slow, and became more deliberate, a significant change in pace and volume focussing my attention back onto the stage and story. I became aware of a new amplified sound, that of a soft thud, the familiar upbeat and downbeat rhythm recognisable as that of the human heart. The sound drew me in, the rhythmic beat fundamental to human life, giving me a sense of suspension in

47 My description tracks my experience and recording of the show performed by Aminita, Glitch, WIZ-RD, Native, ABH and Grove at the Traverse, August 6, 2019.
time. I felt my own bodily rhythms begin to synchronise with that of the performers’ amplified breathing, the simulated sonic heartbeat heightening my own.

As the auditorium and stage darkened, Aminita began a spoken narrative voiceover, her rhythmic words riding the beat, ‘From the mouth to the tongue to the teeth to the lungs the air comes in \(\textit{sound of performers inhaling}\), and makes you one with your surroundings. Grounding your soul.’ At this point, I realised the story had reached the critical moment, the lyrics drawing attention to the moment of creation as well as to my own bodily processes. My pulse quickened again. ‘The air comes in \(\textit{performers inhaling}\)….and makes you born again. Breathe out \(\textit{performers exhaling}\).’ I too followed her instructions, as if Aminita was including me in her address to ‘you’. ‘Breath is life’, her voiceover continued, ‘Death is its absence…’. By now, the performers were dispersed around the stage, their faces and bodies for the most part barely moving and hidden in the gloom. Only the sound of their amplified voices animated the auditorium. Made aware of the mortal and ethical stakes of the moment, I felt a rapt attention: ‘Ideas strangle you like a boa constrictor, until the guilt of potential repercussions turns you lifeless and blue and limp. \(\textit{Faster}\) ‘It’s almost like falling in love again. \(\textit{Very fast}\) It’s like falling in love with the chemical reaction within the synapses within your brain and the adrenaline –’ Here, a huge intake of breath by the other performers cut the voiceover off. \(\textit{Silence}\). Held on an in-breath, I waited, aware that the moment of creation was imminent. \(\textit{An exhalation}\). And then, low in the mix, the steady beeping of a hospital life support monitor, a sign of a fragile life, accompanied by a soft, building breathing. From this came a layered soundscape, a deep pulsing machine-like base-line pitched low, textured with high hat ‘tees’, steady clicks, and vocalised melodies, arising in a slow-tempo spine-tingling multi-voiced harmony of voices. To my enchanted ear, a complex, living organism appeared to be moving as a pulsing sonic entity, a new being blending the textures of synthesised and amplified sound and held in a space and time by the breathing and beating hearts of my own body and the bodies of audience members around me. A lovely, haunting lyrical melody emerged, continuing to tell the story of the genesis, ‘Breathing. Feeling. Seeing is believing. Breathing \(\textit{Beat}\). It’s alive.’ The last syllable of this melody fell deeply, diving down to the low base that is associated in the semiotics of sound with non-human being, and vibrating uncannily in me. Faint whirrings and wheezings were also audible in the rhythmic apparatus emerging from the sonic space of the auditorium, and extended in time by the reverberation added at the sound desk. A shiver ran through me, a
moment of frisson, accompanied by the sense that this new being, collectively experienced, 
was not fully human, despite the human breath that sustained it. 48

The moment of birthing however, experienced in my body and those of others present, had 
now also become a moment of othering. Not a ‘he’, ‘she’ or they’ had been created, but an 
it’, alien, separate and unknown. For Nicholas Ridout, the darkness of the theatre and 
isoation of performer and audience member facilitates a process of ‘mutual becoming-for-others’. 49 A tremor in the body of the audience answers the vibration created in theatre by the 
‘shudder’ of the actor’s body as it becomes something to be seen by another, or a represented 
object. In FHMM, the bodies of the performers were in this sequence shrouded in darkness as 
they retreated upstage into the shadows. Through their vocalic projection, and in a shared 
physiological and imaginative projection, the ‘vocalic body’ of the monster came into 
being.50 Breathing, the conjured monster was felt as human, but never solidified, a fleeting 
ambivalent presence existing ‘as a shifting property in the theatre air’.51 Its ‘body’, like those 
of the performers, remained unseen, throwing more emphasis onto the synchronised 
perceptions that took place as it came into being in the imaginations and physiological 
experiences of audience members. Though it could be felt partly inside and partly outside of 
all of the bodies present, this presence consisted in sounds that resonated with the powers of 
machines. If ‘it’ was other, it was born of our bodies, in conjunction with technologies that 
integrate with and extend the human beyond its normal capacities. In this case the ‘shudder’ 
of ‘becoming-for-others’ did not materialise or reify a body visually, but was felt by bodies 
as a cyborgian event, collectively and physiologically staged, and made fleetingly audible by 
the fusion of vocal apparatus with the wires, plastics and metals of technical equipment.

If the creation of the monster, collectively breathed into life, raises questions regarding the 
responsibilities of society towards its creations, FHMM as a whole made an implicit analogy 
between the experience of othering that the monster undergoes in the novel and those which 
occur in contemporary society. Moving on from the scene of creation, the performers

48 For an account of the biological effects of musical frisson see Luke Harrison and Psyche Loui, ‘Thrills, 
chills, frissons and skin orgasms: toward an integrative model of transcendent psychophysical 
50 Connor, Dumbstruck, p. 36.
51 Ella Finer, ‘Strange objects/ strange properties: Female audibility and the acoustic stage prop’, 
Voice Studies: Critical approaches to process, performance and experience, ed.by Konstantinos 
explored the violent processes of objectification using the bright lights of theatre. Staging the struggle between creator and monster through the conventions of a Beatbox battle in the next sequence, the monster was visually represented by the bodies of the young performers as they pretended to be a hideously deformed four-headed creature. Brightly illuminated, the performers’ faces and mouths, in this sequence clearly visible, gurned in a parody of a crude and jokey act of representation. In one song sequence, ‘Hashtag hideous’, the performers turned a stage lamp on the audience, cheekily addressing the kind of spiteful comments found on social media at individuals exposed to and good humouredly shuddering in its objectifying glare. At other moments in the narrative, the playful creators doubled as shadowy ‘othered’ bodies, fleetingly present in their vocal projection, but not fully visible. As the monster’s story progressed, a figure dimly materialised in the hooded shape of a young man, whose problems, it became apparent, were symptomatic of an alienation caused by social failures. Here, the collective made social commentary through an identification of the young man and the monster, both alone and spurned by their creators in an indifferent world. In his cloak of darkness, and singing a low, sad, single melody, this was a deeply empathetic figure. In other numbers, devised from the performers’ own experiences, the ‘critical voice’ bell hooks hears in rap music was apparent, integrating the ‘explaining, demanding, urging’ voices of the young performers as they conveyed their social critique in rap and spoken word sequences. Overall, FHMM provided a commentary on the making of and being a monster in the light of contemporary issues and processes of social disconnection, othering and exclusion, and on the disavowal by society of responsibility for its offspring.

A cyborgian social

The moment of auditory hallucination and haunting beauty that I described above (p. XX) of the monster’s creation was for me alive with both imaginative possibility and affective charge. Infused with the ‘tummy-lurching’, ‘breath taking’ sense of thrill, as documented in the reviews I quoted above, the shiver it produced in me contrasted with the warmth, energy and sense of inclusivity generated by the participatory gig-theatre style framing of FHMM to which I turn to in this final section. This suggested a circulation of energies and model of being with others that has wider implications for the ‘integrated circuitry’ of British theatre.

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52 bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 27.
Rather than observing the familiar convention at the professional theatre that a play starts without introduction or preamble, the performance of FHMM was topped and tailed by brightly lit interactive sessions led by Murray in the role of MC. In these sessions, Murray framed the show as an ongoing participatory project of which the audience that night was a part, making clear that the 'relaxed' behaviour (now adopted by BAC for all its shows) was more than acceptable. Chatting and dancing, making photos or videos on phones, moving around the auditorium: all were welcome forms of behaviour and engagement. Such relaxations of theatre etiquette, Murray told me in my interview with him, were part of the BA’s ethos of inclusivity, its acknowledgement that to remain alive, theatre must adapt to diverse needs and expectations of audience members. At the Traverse, before FHMM began, some opening numbers had been presented with participants from Edinburgh’s Leith Academy, with whom BA members had worked prior to the run in the Traverse. This opening section had been enthusiastically received by audience members. Convening the final section as if it were one big BA participatory session, Murray divided the whole audience into groups, inviting us to try out beatboxing vocal technique in a ‘call and response’ session. This antiphonal format belongs to the long-practised tradition descended from African vocal traditions, and resonates through African American musical genres from gospel to hip-hop. For musicologist Michael Dowdy, it plays an important role in smaller hip hop venues in jointly producing a space of interactive engagement in which dominant cultural values are contested. Making the basic beatboxing sounds, ‘Boom-Tee-Cla’, the majority of audience members responded together to Murray’s calls, feeling each other’s embodied presence through the sounds of bodies massed and resonating together. This was a chance also to explore vocally the space of the auditorium, and the relations it orchestrated with others, especially with the slight delay in the sound as it bounced off surfaces and was affected by the amplification system. To me, this felt like a much larger and more complex version of the tuning in that I had witnessed during the circle jam when I visited BA in Battersea.

In the beatbox demo that followed, the BA performers played with the form, visibly enjoying themselves, as Murray worked with them to build up and quicken the textures of sounds, stopping and starting the performance abruptly, both amazing us with a display of virtuosity, and physiologically building our experiences of suspense and excitement again through rhythmic play. In these sections, the young performers’ hoodies read as a team strip, rather than a sign of delinquency, suggesting a sense of belonging and shared identity. As the energy ramped up, audience members moved and swayed together, some of them using the distinctive chopping, crisscrossing hand gestures that often accompany a hip hop beat. I turned to look, smile at and laugh with people on either side of me, our bodies animated with a dynamic cultural practice whose presence has increased that has in recent years been becoming gradually more present in British theatre auditoria since the late 2010s. It felt as if there was a huge sea of people, transformed from a listening audience, to a ‘crowd’ sensing, moving and dancing together. We were a circuit where the performers and audience were ‘re-affecting’ each other with the joy that is associated with a spontaneous urge for dancing. As one critic put it, ‘Traverse 1 becomes a rave’.56

The palpable circulation of rhythmical energies through vocal percussion, as with other musical performance, ‘touch’ and opens the listener both to non-normative and to collective, joyful experiences. In The Cultural Politics of Emotions (2004), Sara Ahmed returns to Descartes in thinking through the relationships between bodily sensations, emotion and judgement. Ahmed seeks to understand the motions of affect culturally, relating the way that affect operates on the surfaces of bodies to produce affective norms that enforce social structures such as inclusion and exclusion. Though the majority of her book deals with the circulation of negative affects such as shame and hatred, she writes briefly on pleasure, arguing that ‘queer pleasure’ has traditionally been outside existing heteronormative ‘circuits of exchange’. ‘When bodies touch’, she argues, ‘and give pleasure to bodies that have been barred from contact, then those bodies are reshaped’. 58 As a practice that establishes a circuit of exchange that shapes bodies with hip hop beats rather than language-based sound and text-based dialogue, beatboxing transgresses the conventions and boundaries with which contact

56 See Ana Pais, ‘Re-Affecting the Stage: Affective Resonance as the Function of the Audience’, Humanities 5:79 (2016); and Vuilleumier and Trost, 216.
with others has been policed by the dominant bourgeois norms of British theatre. The
conviviality that the BA generates overrides the conventions of hushed and still behaviour of
audience members, each politely confined to a single seat, and arranged according to price of
purchase. Its sonic, vibrational and rhythmic touch circulates a sort of ‘queer pleasure’.
Ahmed teases out the way that touch is related to our sense of the other who touches: ‘To be
touched in a certain way,’ she argues in an encounter with another which may involve ‘a
reading not only of that encounter, but of the other that is encountered as having certain
characteristics’ (original emphasis). The affective responses generated in encounters with
others, for Ahmed are thus ‘readings’ that ‘not only create the borders between selves and
others, but also “give” others meaning and value’. 59

Taking a cue from Ahmed then, the rhythmic touch of music, the impulse to move it creates,
and the encounters it produces between friends and strangers can help to unfix the
conventional ideas it is possible to make of others, especially when we perceive them as
different from ourselves. This argument finds support in the musicology of rhythm, where
researchers have found evidence that the physiological stimulus of rhythmic sound affects the
ways in which people understand and relate to each other. 60 For me, the bodily motion and
pleasure propagated by the BA collective through their musical practice communed bodies
normally managed by the atomising dynamics that have tended to operate in British theatre.
Their electrifying, playful and dexterous modes of performance radically altered the sonic
and haptic textures of the auditorium, charging audiences with energy that coursed through
bodies, and convened the ‘crowd’ into what Henriques terms a ‘collective subject’ (emphasis
original), in which the ‘epidermal envelope’ of individual subjectivity is breached and
replaced by an ‘open, fluid and multiple whole’. 61 While the BA moved with us as this
resuscitated collective body, revivified and joyful, connecting its members more intensely
and more joyfully, they also established material and affective lines of connection with non-
human substances and digital mechanisms, and wired into wider circulations of affect and
ideas.

59 Ahmed, Cultural Politics, 28.
60 See Bronwyn Tarr, et al, ‘Music and social bonding: “self-other” merging and neurohormonal
To conclude by returning to Haraway, she defines and explores ‘social reality’ as ‘lived social relations’. Her manifesto recommends a pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and bringing together those who are not related to each other in ‘fission impossible’. It has been my argument here that FHMM brought about such a shift in social relations in audience members on both occasions that I attended the show. Both the virtuosity and adept dramaturgy of FHMM demonstrated the collective’s cultural knowledge and skill, placing its young members in a position of critical commentators, with powers to change perceptions and activate alternative ways of being together. As Haraway puts it, ‘taking responsibility for the social task of reconstructing the boundaries of everyday life’ means embracing ‘the skilful task’ of doing this ‘in partial connection with others, in communication with all our parts’. BA’s young performers in this way acted as agents with potential to transform systems, spaces and institutions, and the sociocultural norms that operate in them, their work offering to loop the audience into a circuit powered with pleasure and energy. The cyborgian social generated by BA of which I was a part was an intense experience, and its residues of joy were powerful for me. In the psychophysiology of music, scientists find it is possible to develop a ‘dopaminergic anticipation’ for the return of musical pleasure. For Henriques, the pleasure of the ‘vibes’ is ‘tangible, all-consuming and contagious’. As I have argued, through embodied sharing of beatboxing and hip hop practices, audience members become a ‘crowd’. In an asynchronous sense this crowd is part of an integrated circuit that extends not only to their immediate neighbours in the theatre auditorium, but out beyond to people in bedrooms, schools, streets and sites where beatboxing and other hip-hop practices are frequently practiced, and which loops theatre audiences into the practices of protest and critique, and discourses of injustice that preoccupy contemporary grime and hip hop performers. Though theatre scholars are often cautious in claiming that what happens in theatre produces no more than a temporary glitch in social relations, I, for one, am eager that an increasingly ‘monsterised’ theatre will continue to be inclusive of these integrating, inclusive and extending practices.

62 Haraway, Cyborg, 5-16.
63 Haraway, Cyborg, 67.