English Extension 2
Reflection Statement

Liblotto

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Last year I saw the Melbourne Opera Company perform Bizet's *Carmen,* and whilst the music, costumes and theatricality were spectacular, I came to realise that it lacked in literary integrity. Ultimately, the thing that makes opera a sophisticated form of entertainment is the musical and theatrical spectacle. The dialogue, or libretto, is the least important element in terms of conveying meaning. American scholar G. W. Bowersock writes that "(opera) plots are often absurd, and (their) texts often unintelligible when sung."[1] This understanding formed the basis of my purpose, which is to create an absurd comedy play script that entertainingly explores the meaninglessness of human endeavour through the libretto of opera. I have done this by theatrically demonstrating, in a three-act play script, the process, and ultimate failure of bringing to life a "meaningless" text, the opera *Carmen.* I have also used a pun on the word "libretto" as the title for my major work.

I explored links between absurdist theatre and opera through reading Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd,* which revealed that "Absurd" originally means "out of harmony" in a musical context[2]. Operatic libretto's resemblance to twelfth century "nonsense poetry", considered one of the literary roots of theatre of the absurd[3], compelled me to use the libretto from *Carmen* to convey ambiguous meanings and my characters' "operatic" and ridiculous nature. Furthermore, I chose to run the original French libretto through Google Translate to convey the absurd breakdown of language that drives my Major Work.

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[1] Bowersock, G.W., *Opera is not Dead,* New Republic, 2013
[2] Esslin, M., *The Theatre of the Absurd,* Penguin Books, England, 1968, p. 23
[3] Ibid., p. 330.

My knowledge of absurd theatre was initially stimulated by my study of "After the Bomb" in the Extension I course. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*[4] was the first text I looked to for a sense of absurdist dialogue, and I found the conflict between the characters' motivation and stagnancy appealing, initiating early research in which I wrote down all the lines from the play that suggested this procrastination. *Waiting for Godot* shaped many structural and stylistic choices in my Major Work, with the inclusion of specific references[5], and the repetition of dialogue at the start and end of Act One, to give a sense of endlessness. Investigation into links between libretto and absurdist theatre also uncovered that Beckett himself wrote for an opera, entitled *Neither*. According to the composer, Beckett "d(id)n't like opera"[6], but wrote an ambivalent, dream-like ten line poem for the opera, which is sung very slowly over an entire hour. This amusing fact further inspired my intent to make opera appear absurd.

As I was at risk of writing a stagnant play in early drafts, I read comedies that were not in the absurdist genre in order to develop a sense of a conventional narrative arc. I was wary of, as my mentor put it, "attempting to be too Beckettian", after writing a final act that failed to resolve any conflict, and dissipated in intensity. I emulated the rising tension and sense of chaos in Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*[7], using more libretto (or "script", as in *Noises Off*) as the piece progresses, in a way that blurs the distinction between my characters and the roles they play in *Carmen*. This in turn contributes to my intended purpose of libretto symbolising a breakdown in language. I did, however, maintain absurd narrative elements in the third act, by blurring the

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[4] Beckett, S., *Waiting for Godot,* Faber and Faber Ltd., England, 1955
[5] E.g. *Liblotto,* p. 12
[6] Skempton, H., *Beckett as Librettist,* Music and Musicians, May 1977 p. 5-6
[7] Frayn, M., *Noises Off,* Anchor Books, USA, 2002

fourth wall when the characters discuss the plot device "Dues ex Machina" which then manifests in the unexplained return of a character.

My ongoing reading of both comedies and absurdist plays helped establish more structural and stylistic elements to my script. An important inspiration for shaping the narrative action of my play was Nowra's *Cosi*[8], as it is about putting on an opera with no Italian, no experience, and not enough actors. I drew from the play's disastrous rehearsal situations and relationship tensions, however, I left my relationship tensions predominantly unresolved, as my piece is centered around meaninglessness, whereas *Cosi* is resolved by finding a sense of purpose.

Pinter's *The Birthday Party*[9], alongside *Waiting for Godot,* helped me shape sequences of stichomythia[10]. Furthermore, from reading *The Art of Dramatic Writing*[11], I came to understand the relationship between the premises of my characters and the premise of the piece, as "currents and undercurrents will cross and re-cross – but all of them must further the lifeline, the main premise of the play"[12].

I have specifically appropriated aspects of *Carmen* in my Major Work, by drawing from the personal traits of the main female characters in *Carmen* and juxtaposing them within my play. Cara, who plays the role of Micaela, has the independent, cynical characteristics of Carmen, whilst Eliza, who plays the role of Carmen, has the naïve and loyal characteristics of Micaela. This juxtaposition has given me

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[8] Nowra L., *Così,* Currency Press*,* Australia,1992
[9] Pinter, H., *The Birthday Party,* Methuen & Co.*,* England, 1960
[10] E.g. *Liblotto,* (p. 12)
[11] Egri, L., *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, Touchstone, USA, 2004,
[12] Ibid., p.143

opportunity for character conflict, both with each other and how they relate to the opera *Carmen*. Tom adopts the narcissistic characteristics of his role, Escamillo, and my director, Al, was created to symbolize Don José – the protagonist of *Carmen.* Don José is in love with the character Carmen, and in parallel Al is "in love" with the opera, *Carmen.*

To create dialogue for these characters I drew on conversations from my own experience, and a number of sections are verbatim. One of the challenges in writing dialogue was to create effective conversation and to make sure the characters reacted to each other, as in my early drafts some lines appeared misplaced. By reading comedies such as *Its My Party (and I'll Die if I Want To)*[13] and *A Mother, A Daughter and A Gun*[14] I came to understand flow in dialogue, and I gained a sense of conversations that flowed even whilst the characters were having parallel conversations.

From my study of "After the Bomb" in my English Extension 1 course, I gained detailed knowledge on the topic of absurdism. Studying *Waiting for Godot* gave me a greater understanding of the context in which the text was written, and Heller's *Catch 22*[15] also contained elements of absurdist dialogue, which appealed to me and therefore encouraged my own writing. In addition, Gilbert and Gubar's[16] concepts of the "angel and the monster", studied in the Preliminary Extension course, also influenced my juxtaposition of the female characters and their roles.

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[13] Coleman, E., *Its My Party (And I'll Die If I Want To),* Currency Press, Australia, 1993
[14] Grant, B., *A Mother, A Daughter and A Gun,* Samuel French, Inc., USA, 2006
[15] Heller, J., *Catch 22,* Reprinted Corgi, USA, 1955
[16] Gilbert, S. & Gubar, S., *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Yale University Press, USA, 1979

I intend my target audience to be open-minded, appreciative and knowledgeable of new theatre. Esslin observes that in 1955, when *Waiting for Godot* was first performed, the audience "received the impact of artistic experiences through a filter of critical standards"[17]. However, six decades on, the conventions of absurdist writing are less bewildering to an audience, and I feel my target audience could be found at small, independent theatres such as The Owl and the Pussycat[18] and Red Stitch Actors Theatre[19], in Melbourne. It would be fortunate to have an audience with knowledge of the opera *Carmen*, but proof reading of my work by author Jane Downing[20] affirmed that I have exposed enough of *Carmen's* plot for my piece to stand alone.

I gained further external feedback to assist in the evaluation of my script by organising two readings with senior English and Drama students and teachers from my school. An initial reading of my first two completed acts produced valuable feedback, as my audience anticipated the same disastrous ending that I wanted to write, and I was warned of some slips in character. Having a reading of the unfinished script helped me refine the plot and characters, which made the third act much easier to write, and also reflected the common process of readings conducted in professional script development. In my final reading, the audience's laughter and engagement with my Major Work indicated coherence in terms of the plot and dialogue. My audience also provided further suggestions in regards to the flow of narrative and clarity of character, which I have since addressed.

The research involved in creating my Major work has broadened my understanding of

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[17] Esslin, M., p. 28
[18] The Owl and the Pussycat Theatre, Richmond
[19] Red Stitch Actors Theatre, St Kilda
[20] J. Downing, pers. comm.

both theatre and theatrical texts, and given me interest in pursuing further reading and experience in absurd theatre. I hope to extend my enjoyment of writing play scripts beyond secondary school.

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