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Eight Shows a Week: Investigating the Psychological Cost of a Musical Theatre Performance Career

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Abstract

Pursuing a career as a musical theatre performer is a dream for the thousands of students who undertake performing arts courses in the UK each year. However, the realities of vocally and physically demanding schedules are at odds with the glamorous stage scenes seen by audiences. This thesis investigates performers' experiences of sustaining a musical theatre performance career and the factors contributing to the psychological cost of performing. Recommendations were developed through knowledge exchange with industry partner organisations and professionals to improve performers' lives and inspire change within the musical theatre industry.

This study employed a two-phase approach. Phase One involved semi-structured interviews with 14 industry experts, highlighting areas for further consideration with performers. Phase Two comprised a survey with 105 respondents and semi-structured interviews with 15 UK-based professional musical theatre performers. Three pre-existing validated scales were used: the WHO-5 Well-being Index, the Satisfaction with Life Scale, and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory.

Reflexive thematic analysis identified essential considerations for musical theatre performers: career calling; the show must not always go on; support, communication and inequities. All participants exhibited career calling, often experiencing it as a double-edged sword that positively and negatively impacted their well-being. Findings suggest that having a calling leaves performers vulnerable to excessive demands from the industry, illustrated by the high level of burnout across participants. Some view *"the show must go on"* as a unifying mantra for casts, while others see it as a toxic narrative imposed by management. Performers spoke of inequities in casting and the lack of change that diversity initiatives have afforded. Findings reveal the importance of all industry professionals dismantling stereotypes and working in solidarity with marginalised performers. Some are already leading positive change,

but an industry-wide shift is needed, with communication at its core and where well-being support is accessible and equitable.

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Personal statement

Crucial to this project are the voices of performers and industry professionals from marginalised communities. As a white, thin, cisgender female, queer, middle-class, dyslexic researcher, I acknowledge my privilege and how it impacts how I have approached this research. Particularly, as a woman, some of the topics discussed by performers really resonated with me, and I am so proud to be contributing to the vital conversation about inequities within the creative industries. I have learned so much about musical theatre history and have been horrified by the inequities that continue to persist in the industry today. Throughout this project, I have made every effort to use the most appropriate language, particularly when writing about the experiences of marginalised performers. However, language is continuously evolving, and some terms used today may be improved upon in the future. For example, during data collection, I used the term performer of colour, but following recent discourse, this thesis uses the term Global Majority performer to describe performers who are Black, Brown, Asian, dual-heritage or indigenous to the global south. I have made every effort to ensure the correct pronouns have been used for participants and referenced authors.

Glossary

All terms are defined in a musical theatre context.

Access consultant	Advises productions on addressing any access barriers, from physical to digital, to make shows more accessible.
Access manager	Responsible for overseeing the implementation and management of accessibility strategies, to ensure access is sustained over time in a production or theatre company.
Burnout	Physical and mental exhaustion from workplace stress.
Career calling	Pursuing a vocation that brings great meaning to an individual.
Cast	“The entire collection of performers that could potentially play in a production” (Elster, 2023, p. 8)
Choreographer	Member of the creative team of a production responsible for the dance and movement steps of a show
Company manager	The “primary administrative role and responsible for overseeing the day-to-day running of a theatrical production. The role includes scheduling, press, events, holidays, health and safety, ticket requests, training and bridging communications across all departments” (Elster, 2023, p. 9).
Contract	When a performer is in either rehearsals or performances for a show.
Cover	A general term used to describe someone who knows a track / role and goes on for that role in case of injury or sickness. It is used interchangeably with the term understudy.
Creative team	Those primarily involved with the artistic aspects of producing a show, such as the writer and musical director.
Dance captain	“A dance captain and an assistant dance captain have the responsibility for maintaining the quality and intention of the choreography in performance” (Ashton, 2021, p. 6).
Dramaturg	The role of dramaturg can vary, but typically involves providing edits to the book writing of a musical and ensuring the accuracy of factors such as the language and historical context of a show.
Ensemble	A chorus member of a cast.
Equity	The most prominent trade union in the UK performing arts that represents a range of creatives from performers to stage management.
Global Majority	People who are non-white, including Black, Asian or those from mixed or multiple backgrounds.

Intimacy coordinator/director	A “professional who assists in choreographing scenes of an intimate nature, the role may also include guidance of union regulations and diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility” (Lashmar, 2023, p. 9)
Offstage swing	“A cover for absent ensemble tracks who does not have their own ensemble track” (Elster, 2023, p.8).
Onstage swing	“A cover for absent ensemble tracks who also has their own ensemble track” (Elster, 2023, p.8).
Pit musician	Musician within a musical theatre production, traditional plays in the “pit” underneath the stage.
Previews	“A part of the rehearsal process when tickets are sold, but the show is not officially open, and changes can be made based on audience responses” (Smith & Eyer, 2015, p. xx).
Principal/ lead	Performer in a leading role.
Production team	Those behind producing a show, from producers to general management.
Production well-being support	A range of professionals who form part of the pastoral support for performers, including intimacy coordinators, access managers and well-being practitioners.
Run	A series of performances, often weeks or months.
Standby	A cover for a principal role who typically does not have a role of their own and is ready to perform at any time.
Swing	A “performer who learns different ensemble tracks and is able to go on for any of those parts at short notice or even during a show” (Ashton, 2021, p. 6).
Tech	Also known as “Technical Rehearsal, when rehearsing technical elements of the show, including sound and lighting, is prioritised” (Smith & Eyer, 2015, p. xxi).
Technical team	A range of professionals who ensure the technical running of a show, including stage management, lighting and sound.
Tortured artist	A controversial and damaging belief that performers should suffer to create “ <i>authentic art</i> ” (Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 7).
Track	The “complete journey of an onstage cast member in a show, including their backstage movements” (Elster, 2023, p. 221).
Triple threat	Used by some to describe a musical theatre performer who excels in singing, acting and dancing. However, because of the exclusionary nature of the term its use has been heavily criticised.
Understudy	A “cast member who covers a principal or supporting role in case of absence” (Elster, 2023, p. 221). An understudy differs from a standby in that an understudy may have their own track.

Chapter 1.1: Introduction

Musical theatre is widely regarded as a physically and emotionally demanding art form (Fenton, 2022; Gehling et al., 2014; Moore, 2024). Despite this tendency, the potential “*psychological cost*” of a career in musical theatre has, until recently, received limited attention in research (Kumar, 2019; Walker & Commander, 2017, p. 262). Within the current literature, musical theatre performers have traditionally been considered within the broad category of *actors* (i.e. Performers in any acting profession and across genres including television, film, and stage) (Seton et al., 2019). This overlooks the specific challenges that professional musical theatre performers encounter, such as the eight shows a week standard performance schedule and the vocal versatility required to master such a broad style (Moore, 2024). In recent years, there has been an increase in scholarship concerning the careers of musical theatre performers by authors including Fenton (2022), Kumar (2018), Moore (2024), Rigopoulou (2022), O’Bryan and Harrison (2024), and Seife (2022). Fenton (2022) was the first to develop a musical theatre career capital framework, highlighting key areas associated with performer careers and curriculum improvement recommendations. O’Bryan and Harrison (2024) also detail a significant contribution, offering an overview of the culture of musical theatre and industry demands. O’Bryan and Harrison (2024) provide an initial exploration of the experiences of marginalised performers. Still, more research is required to fully understand how inequities impact performers with protected characteristics through an empirical mixed-method study.

This study seeks to address this gap by identifying the factors behind the “*psychological cost*” of a career in musical theatre, contributing to the understanding of the career identities of musical theatre performers and the impacts of inequities on performers with protected characteristics. This research additionally seeks to determine the prevalence of burnout among this population today in the precarious economic climate (Morgan, 2022). This study also seeks to identify key priorities for improving the well-being of performers and

make actionable recommendations to the industry. Recommendations have been developed in partnership with industry organisations and in collaboration with industry professionals through knowledge exchange to ensure recommendations are actionable and can facilitate positive changes within the industry and improve the lives of performers.

Based on these aims, the relevant literature from four central research areas is highlighted and critically evaluated.

These are as follows:

1. *Situating musical theatre within the UK creative and cultural industries*. This considers current literature on performance careers and the creative industries.

2. *Understanding musical theatre style and performance*. This section outlines a brief history of the style and the concept of the triple threat performer, which are both crucial to contextualise the experiences of performers.

3. *Musical theatre and well-being* explores the current research, both musical theatre performer well-being specifically and in the wider context of well-being research in the arts.

4. *Musical theatre and inequities* outlines current representation within the industry and focuses on the experiences of performers with protected characteristics.

These four key areas of literature provide the context for why an investigation into the well-being of musical theatre performers is needed. Sections 1, 2 and 4 highlight external factors surrounding performers that could impact well-being. For example, the current economic climate of the cultural and creative industries, the physical demands of the performance style, and issues of inequity within the industry could all contribute to performers' experiences of the industry. The concept of stigma is a commonality shared between the four areas of literature. For example, stigma surrounding vocal health persists within the industry (Moore, 2024). Additionally, musical theatre as a style is often stigmatised within the performance industries and seen as lesser than its non-musical counterparts (Diamond, 2021).

Extensive literature exists on the cultural and creative industries, and so only key texts were explored for this thesis, including the work of Brook et al. (2020). Furthermore, music psychology research offers great insight into the well-being of musicians (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). This sizable area of research, however, is only somewhat considered due in part to the lack of character embodiment and differing performance schedules.

This literature review seeks to determine the current economic landscape in which the musical theatre industry resides. It also examines how literature presents the core skills required for musical theatre performance, how different styles within musical theatre impact performers' experiences, and what research currently reveals about inequities within the industry.

1.2 Situating musical theatre within the UK creative and cultural industries

1.2.1 Defining the creative and cultural industries

To contextualise the relevant literature on musical theatre, first, the wider culture of the creative industries in the UK will be considered. Musical theatre is situated within the creative and cultural industries (DCMS, 2022). The UK Government's original document outlining the creative industries was published in 1998 and defined the sector as:

“those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (DCMS, 2001, p. 4).

Many argue that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) document played a significant role in increasing awareness for the sector (Oakley, 2004; Gross, 2020). The definition, however, has been subject to intense debate (Gross, 2020). For example, Galloway and Dunlop (2007) argue that it fails to emphasise the *“symbolic meaning”* of cultural creativity and the public good that it contributes to (p. 28). Furthermore, Oakley (2004) insists that it enforces a divide between the sciences and the arts, *“maintaining Britain's long-standing ‘two cultures’ tradition”* (p. 69). Some scholars have called for literature to return to the term cultural industries rather than creative industries and focus more on their nature in terms of *“people (cultural workers), place (cultural spaces and places), economy (business models and relations), and creativity in cultural activities (mental, social, psychological activity)”* (Kong, 2014, p. 605). This project concerns the performers (cultural workers) of musical theatre; the uniqueness of musical theatre is rarely recognised within cultural research policy, and is instead simply grouped with performing arts more generally.

The creative and cultural industries (CCIs) contributed £109bn to the UK economy in 2021 (DCMS, 2022). Within the sector, performing arts gain huge audiences, with London

theatres alone seeing attendance of over 17.1 million people in 2024, an 11% increase compared to pre-pandemic levels (Society of London Theatre) (SOLT, 2025). Although influenced by many other styles from opera to folk to rock, musical theatre is its own genre, characterised by an emphasis on “*lyrical intelligibility*” and storytelling (Macpherson, 2024, p. 38). Approximately 39 theatres make up London’s West End, which extends across London and as of March 2023, 33 were home to a musical theatre production (Official London Theatre, 2023). These figures highlight the vibrant musical theatre scene today in the West End. Despite musical theatre’s contribution to London and popularity, it has been slow to receive academic scholarship, being seen as a “*viable academic field*” only since the mid-2000s (Wolf, 2016, para. 1).

It is crucial to realise that musical theatre productions in London’s West End are not the complete picture of the UK’s musical theatre industry. Many regional theatres are home to musical theatre, and many West End shows travel across the UK, touring, following a *run* in London (Milburn, 2022, p. 389). During March 2023, approximately 40 professional musical theatre productions toured the UK, and so it is vital in discussions of musical theatre performers’ careers to consider professional shows throughout the country (see musicalsontour.co.uk for examples of productions). Although research into the precise number of theatres hosting professional musical theatre productions across the UK proved inconclusive, the figure is approximately 165 venues (UK Theatre, 2023). Outside the West End, a huge number of regional theatres contribute to the local economy and community well-being (Cooper, 2020). Regional theatres are also key in the development of new musical theatre productions, for example, *Standing at the Sky’s Edge* (2023) received high acclaim in its run at The Crucible, Sheffield, before transferring to the West End and gaining eight Olivier Award Nominations, ultimately winning best new musical and best new score or orchestration (Bushby, 2023). However, despite the value of regional theatres, the government-funded Arts Council England has continued to prioritise London-based theatres. Consequently, many regional theatre companies have had to close in recent years (Body, 2023; Hemley, 2023).

It is vital to acknowledge the positive, wide-reaching effects of the creative industries on society and look beyond their economic value. The cultural industries have great value in allowing people to “*discover, disclose and distribute their creativity— in all its diversity and complexity of social and cultural meanings*” and ultimately come to terms with life (Banks, 2015, p. 35).

1.2.2 Economic climate

In recent years, the musical theatre industry has faced significant challenges, from the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the closure of theatres (Salvador, 2021), to the subsequent cost-of-living crisis amalgamating in a “*perfect storm*” (Morgan, 2022, para. 1). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK Government policy categorised the CCIs as “*non-essential*” in society (Jansson et al., 2023; Navarrete, 2021). Cultural workers faced considerable economic difficulties due to a lack of work, and many freelancers were not eligible for government support schemes (Lamonica & Isernia, 2022). Along with economic difficulties, creatives may have experienced issues with identity due to the government not prioritising their sector (Jansson et al., 2023). This is highly relevant to professional musical theatre performers, who are the focus of this study, as the majority are categorised as self-employed and may still be suffering from the impacts of recent crises (Morgan, 2022; Navarrete, 2021).

Local governments are the largest funder of much of the CCIs (Rex & Campbell, 2022). This funding has been in sharp decline over the past decade, and despite the economic difficulties, theatre venues and organisations across the sector have continued to see their grants reduced (Morgan, 2022). According to a report by Cooper (2020), from 2009 to 2019, over £860m was cut from annual council spending on arts and culture. Moreover, in November 2022, many theatres and theatre companies across the UK saw further reductions or an end entirely to their funding from Arts Council England (Body, 2023; Hemley, 2023; Morgan, 2022). These cuts came at an immensely challenging time for performers, as they took place during the cost-of-living crisis of 2022. Creatives from across the sector have been demanding

greater financial support from the government (Morgan, 2022). For example, through schemes to guarantee against financial loss, as many deem producing a musical in the current climate a significant financial risk (Morgan, 2022).

However, this challenging economic situation is not uncharted territory for the sector. This is because the precarity of CCI careers has worsened for decades, partly due to the lack of government funding (Navarrete, 2021). This long-running issue could be rooted in prejudice against the arts, evident in various campaigns by the different UK governments. For example, the Blair administration in the 1990s famously undervalued the arts, and the 2020 conservative government backed an advertisement that encouraged performing artists to retrain in technology (Alexander, 2008; Hewison, 2014; de Peuter et al., 2022). On a policy and cultural level, a “*continued stigmatisation*” exists within the UK, that a career in the CCIs is not a legitimate vocation (Maxwell et al., 2018; Shaughnessy et al., 2022, p. 5).

Musical theatre suffers stigmatisation even within the theatre industry, as it is often seen as lesser than non-musical plays. For example, during this project's infancy, playwright David Hare (2023) wrote the headline “*musicals are killing theatre*” and described a “*dismay*” at a supposed lack of non-musical plays in the West End (para. 1). Musical theatre advocates, including world-renowned composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, countered Hare's claims, highlighting numerous non-musical plays in the West End at the time and Hare's potential bitterness towards musical theatre, possibly due to his own unsuccessful foray into the genre (Wood, 2023). Hare has since spoken out saying his words were “*misreported*” and explained that he feels that “*musicals are crowding out the West End*” and hoped for more balance between non-musical plays and musical theatre (Gordon, 2024, para. 17). Still, a headline that claims “*musicals are killing theatre*” fuels a rivalry between non-musical plays and musical theatre, undermines the economic and cultural value of the musical theatre, and forces creatives and performers to defend the art form. The impact of these perceptions on performers' experiences, particularly their identity formation, was discussed during this

project. Undeterred by this stigmatisation, however, performers continue to pursue careers within the sector, and the nature of such careers is now explored.

1.2.3 Portfolio careers

Across the CCIs and notably in theatre, individuals often find themselves in portfolio careers (i.e. working numerous part-time jobs at once instead of one single full-time job) (Bennett & Bridgstock, 2015; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). Performing arts institutions take different approaches to educating students on the nature of portfolio careers (Blackwood et al., 2019). Scholars emphasise the importance of the term “*protean career*”, which is at the “*extreme end of portfolio careers*” (Bennett, 2009, p. 311). Protean careers are marked by personal feelings of achievement rather than the traditional notions of career success through a high salary and are inherently driven by the person to allow them to change and adapt, which accommodates opportunities that arise. In such careers, identity can become linked to one’s career, and as a result, one must constantly adapt and evolve (Bennett, 2009).

Portfolio careers are typically non-linear. This can be particularly challenging for those in the early stages of their career who enter the industry expecting vertical careers (Foster, 2013). Performance students across the arts disciplines often enter the CCIs hoping to be full-time performers, with specific career aspirations; for example, an actor with a dream role searching for a “*lucky break*” (Blackwood et al., 2019, p. 18). As a result, the reality of a horizontal career can feel like a failure. Scholars such as Harvie (2009) argue that the theatre industry is inherently unbalanced, with an elite few achieving celebrity status in regular employment and the vast majority remaining as “*unknowns*” with limited work (p. 39). This is reminiscent of Layder’s (1984) three tiers of English actors: 5% elite actors who are in stable employment, 15% actors who are employed fairly regularly and the majority 80% who are unknown and surviving from other sources of income. This perspective has been criticised, however, as in reality the theatre industry is far more nuanced than Layder depicts (Nobis, 2015, p. 198). It is crucial that students understand that the career trajectory of a performer

can look very different from a traditional vertical career seen in other sectors (Foster, 2013). Furthermore, they should be aware of the “*psychological cost*” from a horizontal career that features repeated rejections (Bennett, 2009; Walker & Commander, 2017, p. 262). As a result, scholars have called for greater education for performing arts students in entrepreneurship and career awareness to ensure students are more equipped to deal with non-linear careers (Blackwood et al., 2019; Hadley, 2015). This study considers how musical theatre performers navigate what is often a non-linear portfolio career.

Many creatives pursue portfolio careers that remain firmly within the creative sector, dividing their time between less creative work but more financially lucrative work and work that is primarily for creative expression (Bridgstock & Cunningham, 2016). Work outside one’s main creative vocation is often crucial in sustaining a career in performance and is termed within the industry a “*survival job*” (Donovan, 2023, p. 523). Despite the variation of portfolio careers across the CCIs, it is interesting to note the high frequency of creative graduates in the education sector (Goldsmith & Bridgstock, 2014). It is likely that many choose to supplement their income with teaching, as it can not only offer a stable income but also allows performers to still work in a sector that is linked to their creative work (Bernard et al., 2023)

Survival jobs outside the creative sector tend to be flexible, casual work. For example, a common trope exists of actors as waiters (Throsby & Zednik, 2011). This type of service work can enable performers to earn a stable, albeit often low-paid, income, and can sometimes afford the flexibility of being able to attend auditions (Harvie, 2009; Maxwell et al., 2015; McAuliffe, 1977; Throsby & Zednik, 2011). Balancing jobs outside the sector can prove challenging. Performers may feel that they should sacrifice the financial security that survival jobs provide to allow them to fully commit to their craft (Maxwell et al., 2015). Maxwell et al. (2015) found that most actors in their study earned more from survival jobs than acting. This can create complex identity issues, as an “*intrinsic connection between personal identity and professional identity*” exists, which can be difficult to navigate if performers gain most of their income from other means and are frequently out of work (Dimen-Wagner, 2017, p. 9).

Inequities within the industry mean financial precarity can be more pertinent for performers with protected characteristics. For example, in a recent report, 42% of freelancers across the theatre industry who identify with having a disability or long-term medical condition earned less than the national living wage (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2024). This research seeks to understand how financial precarity and inequities impact performers' careers and well-being.

Furthermore, performers may feel the need to justify their careers if they seek to work in the CCIs, but their main vocation is a survival job (Dimen-Wagner, 2017; Hennekam, 2017). According to Hennekam (2017), navigating numerous workplace identities can psychologically stress artists. This is particularly worrying, as the current economic climate is forcing more artists than ever to have survival jobs and evaluate the sustainability of a career in musical theatre (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2024). Nobis (2015) emphasises the additional challenges that can be seen in later career stages, often linked to increased financial responsibility due to family commitments (Nobis, 2015).

1.2.4 Career calling and identity

Given the "*continued stigmatisation*" that exists towards the CCIs and the lack of government support, one might wonder why so many people choose to pursue a career within the sector (Shaughnessy et al., 2022, p. 5). Additionally, from the outset, the performing arts industry is fiercely competitive. This is because across the UK, 2,700 students enrol on performing arts programmes from 20,500 auditions, and the harsh reality is that many will never earn a stable income from performing (Confirming Quality in Dance, Drama and Musical Theatre (CDMT), 2022). Many performers are simply drawn to the industry, and despite any negative aspects, they cannot be convinced of doing anything else (McAuliffe, 1977). This brings to mind connotations of *career calling*, a concept related to previously discussed protean careers, as both define career success by personal values (Gubler et al., 2014). Career calling involves someone finding great meaning in their work and can be understood through seven

components devised by Dobrow (2004): inner passion, personal identity, need to do it/urgency, longevity, engulfs consciousness, sense of meaning, and contributes to self-esteem. Pursuing a calling can increase life and career meaning, with strong connections with others in the industry (Cardador & Caza, 2012; Duffy & Dik, 2013). Research emphasises, however, the need to be cautious with the pursuit and development of a calling, as once obtained, creatives can often be disappointed with the realities of a career (Allmendinger et al., 1996).

Callings can be difficult to maintain and decline over time, sometimes surprisingly as soon as one begins to pursue the chosen career (Cardador & Caza, 2012; Dobrow, 2013). Additionally, some performers may experience destructive callings (Duffy & Dik, 2013). For example, performers may encounter emotional and physical exhaustion and burnout because they are determined to follow their career (Duffy & Dik, 2013). Callings “*facilitate identification with the domain of the calling,*” making the career an integral part of a performer’s identity (Hirschi, 2012, p. 480). This is exemplified when an actor explains: “*When I’m not working, I feel I have no identity*” (Nobis, 2015, p. 208). Furthermore, in a study by Cinque et al. (2021), theatre actors describe a religious narrative behind their work, with a sense of duty to embrace anguish in the name of authenticity, thus propagating the common stereotype of a “*tortured artist*” (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023). The tortured artist identity suggests the concept of otherness, us (those within the sector) and them (those outside the sector) (Jansson et al., 2023). As a result, this only further reinforces performers’ artistic identities and could be a key driver behind “*sustained occupational commitment*” to the industry (Jansson et al., 2023, p. 76).

Research highlights the need for an adaptive career identity to help navigate the turbulent portfolio careers often experienced by performing artists (Bridgstock, 2011; Hall, 2002). In addition, a supportive network both in and outside the industry can help to maintain a calling in a positive sense, particularly when in conjunction with a healthy work-life balance

(Lysova et al., 2019). The phenomenon of calling could prove common among musical theatre performers, as many cite entering the industry with a “*dream role*” (White, 2021, p. 48).

1.2.5 Musical theatre career capital

Musical theatre career capital, developed by Fenton (2022), is a concept that encompasses the knowledge essential for a career as a musical theatre performer. Based on Jones and DeFillippi’s (1996) career competencies and the concept of an intelligent career, Fenton (2022) breaks down musical theatre career capital into six knowledge-based principles, each relating to at least one career theory. Previously discussed theories of portfolio and protean careers and career calling form central parts of the framework. The other theories Fenton (2022) utilises are global boundaryless career, social identity theory and imposter syndrome.

Competency 1. Knowing What – The portfolio career theory provides insight into the non-linear career performers are likely to encounter.

Competency 2. Knowing Where – The global boundaryless career theory indicates the global nature of the industry.

Competency 3. Knowing When – The global boundaryless career, protean career, and career as calling theories facilitate understanding of when performers should consider other career opportunities.

Competency 4. Knowing Why – The protean career and career as calling theories help answer why performers pursue this career

Competency 5. Knowing Who – Social identity theory and imposter syndrome provide insight into the social environment performers navigate.

Competency 6. Knowing How – All theories contribute to how a performer might best navigate their career.

(Fenton, 2022, p. 409).

Fenton (2022) successfully addressed many of the facets that make up a musical theatre career. It could be argued, however, that Fenton (2022) underestimates the impact of protected characteristics, as she only explores personal identity in terms of personal value and how it is impacted by work. This project seeks to build on Fenton's (2022) concept of musical theatre career capital by further understanding the nature of musical theatre careers and the effects of protected characteristics on career identities. Fenton's (2022) framework is considered in the context of this project's findings and whether it accurately presents the industry and the elements of a musical theatre performer's career today.

1.2.6 Conclusion

A review of the current literature on the UK's creative industries has helped position musical theatre within the wider sector. The economic climate performers face was a recurring topic of discussion throughout this thesis, given the emotional strains of financially demanding times. The portfolio nature of musical theatre careers has been explored, highlighting the complexity of identity and work within the industry. Perhaps the most important factor discussed is the "*continued stigmatisation*" towards the arts in the UK (Shaughnessy et al., 2022, p. 5). The 2023 industry Olivier Awards exemplified this attitude specifically towards musical theatre. Although the ceremony featured musical performances, this seemed only for commercial appeal as there were far fewer nominations and categories involving musical theatre than non-musical plays; thereby diminishing the opportunities for musical theatre performers and creatives to be awarded (Official London Theatre, 2023). This highlights prejudice even within the arts itself towards musical theatre, despite its immense economic and cultural contributions to London and the rest of the UK.

1.3 Understanding musical theatre style and performance

1.3.1 What is a musical?

In order to present and critique the literature on the demands of the musical theatre industry today and performer well-being, first, the landscape of the genre and required skills must be understood. In establishing what constitutes a musical, it is necessary to understand the history of musical theatre. However, musical theatre has a rich and complex history influenced by forms such as “*opera, operetta, music hall, vaudeville, burlesque, minstrelsy, and melodrama, along with musical styles including jazz, blues, folk, rock, pop, gospel, liturgical music, and hip hop*” (Macpherson, 2024, p. 21). Macpherson (2024) argues that due to its complex origins, musical theatre exists outside high and low culture and in a middlebrow that is commercial, yet speaks to important social issues, for instance, climate change (*Hadestown, 2016*). He emphasises that musical theatre is not opera, because the story is a crucial element, whereas in opera, the voice is always the most prioritised (Macpherson, 2024).

Some scholars argue that a suitable starting point when considering the origins of the modern musical is *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), which premiered in London in 1728 (Fenton, 2022; Mordden, 2013). *The Beggar's Opera* is often key to discussions of the history of musical theatre for three key reasons: the show was in English (Italian operas were more common in London during the time), it began the new style of “*ballad opera*” being both comical and satirical and was the first long-running show of its kind (Fenton, 2022; Hurwitz, 2014; Kenrick, 2010; Mordden, 2013). In the century that followed, live entertainment continued to become increasingly popular both in Europe and America. The next key show in musical theatre history was *The Black Crook* (1866), which Hurwitz (2014) denotes as the first American musical. *The Black Crook* was an international collaboration of singing, acting and dancing with the involvement of a Parisian ballet company (Fenton, 2022) and European

influences in its nature as a *melodrama*, meaning music and drama (Taylor & Rush, 2022). The show was in the minstrelsy style, a “*problematic performance mode involving white men painting their face black*” (Fenton, 2022, p. 30). Scholars today highlight the complexity of discussions surrounding minstrelsy and blackface, as although the style was problematic, many Black performers of the style fought against stereotypes with agency and communicated irony to Black audience members (Tourniaire, 2023; Whitfield, 2019). Conversely, Macpherson (2024) posits *In Town* (1897) as the beginning of the form of musical comedy, as when *The Black Crook* was performed in London in 1872, the score was entirely rewritten. *In Town* combined elements of high and lowbrow styles, such as the vocal techniques of operetta with burlesque parody, thus existing in a middlebrow aesthetic. Musical theatre today remains middlebrow, while hugely popular globally, the “*legitimacy*” of the style is still questioned (Macpherson, 2024, p. 16).

During the late 1800s, hundreds of thousands of Irish and Germans immigrated to America, contributing substantially to the development of the American identity. The likes of duos Weber and Fields, and Harrigan and Hart, were prominent figures writing musicals depicting stereotypes of Irish and German immigrants onstage (Hurwitz, 2016). These American musicals were incredibly popular, largely among the immigrant populations, and were ultimately “*outsiders creating an image of ‘America’ and ‘the American dream,’ to which they, themselves, aspired*” (Hurwitz, 2016, p. 33; Kasinitz, 2019). Savran (2004) emphasises the important contributions marginalised social groups, such as the Irish, as well as “*Jews, African Americans, and gay men,*” have had in the development of musical theatre (p. 216). A crucial milestone in musical theatre was the hugely successful *Shuffle Along* (1921), with a book by Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles. It became an influential and significant part of the Harlem Renaissance, a period of cultural flourishing in the 1920s (Everett, 2024). According to Huggins and Rampersad (2007), the strength of *Shuffle Along* lay within its music and dance, with its chorus praised by reviewers. However, musical theatre historiographies continually overlook the contributions of Black performers and creatives and instead focus on

a default of whiteness (Whitfield, 2019). Marginalised groups have been central to musical theatre throughout history as both consumers and creators. Therefore, it is vital when researching the genre to consider the experiences of performers from marginalised groups, which this thesis prioritises.

During the early twentieth century, the style developed into what now constitutes the modern musical, which has two key “*prestigious theatre districts*.” London (West End) and New York (Broadway) (Ashton, 2021, p. 3; Taylor & Rush, 2022). However, as has already been outlined, much outstanding theatre occurs outside London, such as Sheffield Theatres (Whitfield, 2019). The modern musical is made up of an integration of music, drama and dance that blend to drive a plot; some argue that *Oklahoma!* (1943) was the first musical to do this (Kenrick, 2010). For instance, the dancers in *Oklahoma!* were also characters with backstories contributing to the storytelling. *Oklahoma!* was hugely influential and triggered a new scene structure, which involved “*dialogue [that] builds into song, and the climax of the song is the climax of the scene*” (Hurwitz, 2014, p. 144). Here began the so-called “*Golden Age*” of musical theatre, a period which lasted until the 1960s (Hurwitz, 2014; Moore, 2024). It is important to realise that countless musicals during this period and those that followed had a default of whiteness and featured stereotypes (Whitfield, 2019).

During the 1970s-80s, the likes of Cameron Mackintosh and Andrew Lloyd Webber developed a new era of musicals, the *megamusical*, such as *Les Misérables* (1985) (Fenton, 2022). Musical of the era were *mega* in their level of spectacle and global spread; some argue this era of musical favours “*style over substance*” (Hurwitz, 2014, p. 188; Taylor & Rush, 2022). Global financial success has only continued to grow with modern musicals such as *The Lion King* (1997), which grossed had \$6.2 billion globally by 2014 (Savran, 2017). The megamusical forms part of the commercial sector in the UK, which typically seeks to make entertaining theatre for profit (Clements, 2024). The subsidised sector, primarily publicly funded, tends to produce more innovative works with a mission at its core (Clements, 2024). Today, modern shows can vary significantly in musical style from contemporary pop sounds

to revivals of “Golden Age” musicals (Moore, 2024). Some musicals, such as *Bonnie & Clyde* (2009), feature numerous musical styles within one show (Al-Hassan, 2023). The “*partial and fragmented*” history of musical theatre has resulted in a hugely diverse genre (Wolf, 2007, p. 54). As a result, current musicals in the West End range from contemporary musicals such as *Hamilton* (2016), “Jukebox” musicals like *& Juliet* (2019) with scores made up of popular songs and revivals of “Golden Age” musicals, including *Oklahoma!* The range of styles present within musical theatre is vital to discussions of well-being as it has created a wide range of vocal, dance and acting demands expected of performers, which are discussed further throughout this chapter.

In defining musical theatre, Kenrick (2010) highlights five key elements that successfully combine to tell the story of a musical. These include: the music and lyrics, script/dialogue, choreography, staging and physical production (the set and costumes). Some musicals emphasise one element more than others. For example, *Les Misérables* (1985) is entirely sung, while *Newsies* (2011) is more dance oriented. Moreover, *Phantom of the Opera* (1986) features complex staging compared to a more minimalist staging seen in *Dear Evan Hansen* (2016). Musical theatre productions range in size, but the average show comprises a cast featuring an ensemble and lead roles, as well as creative and production teams. The creative or design team includes roles such as producers and musical director, and there is usually an extensive backstage crew. There is some discourse surrounding the term creative team, with scholars such as Diamond (2021) arguing that the term imposes a hierarchical divide. For example, categorising performers as cast and not under the “*creative*” umbrella undermines the creativity in a musical theatre performance career (Diamond, 2021). Ensemble roles can vary drastically, with some performers on for the same track (role) every night. Others, like onstage swings, perform every night, but know numerous tracks and offstage swings, understudies, and stand-bys only perform when another performer is absent. This means that many performers may not know which (if any) role they are playing in a performance until they arrive at the theatre and could even be required to perform halfway

through a show with very little notice (Smith & Eyer, 2015). Standbys have described this sense of uncertainty as challenging to manage, as it could take months or a year until a standby is required to perform, and sometimes they may never go on for a role (Ford, 2012). These issues are an important part of discussions of ensemble well-being throughout this project.

Other roles also play a crucial part in musical theatre productions. For example, each production has a general and a company manager, the former “*oversee[s] all the financial and business concerns of a show*” and the latter the everyday running of the production (Bogyo, 2017, p 11). The company manager, like performers, often attends eight shows a week, acting as the “*on-site representation*” for the producer and management (Bogyo, 2017, p.13). Their job also involves making the performers feel “*valued and cared for*” while liaising between the cast and the design team (Bogyo, 2017, p.13). Productions can also hire access managers, vocal coaches and intimacy directors; these roles can drastically improve performers' experiences in a production (Flynn, 2025). For example, vocal coaches can help performers to navigate the “*gruelling*” demands of eight shows a week by assisting performers to improve their vocal health (Flynn, 2025, para. 1). Despite the value they can bring to a production, vocal coaches are not always seen by producers as essential (Flynn, 2025). Professionals who specialise in supporting the portrayal of intimate scenes, known as intimacy coordinators or directors, can help performers to engage with a story more confidently (Lashmar, 2023). Lastly, roles such as access consultants, coordinators and managers are crucial in making productions accessible for disabled, deaf and neurodiverse audiences and performers alike (Guthrie, 2023). There are many other roles within a production that can impact performers' experiences, such as stage managers and wardrobe teams, detailed in existing literature (Doyle, 2024; Flynn, 2025). Depending on a production's size and financial constraints, a show might feature only some of these professionals.

1.3.2 Performance skills and the “triple threat”

Some scholars argue the musical theatre industry “relies” on “triple threat” performers (Moore, 2024; Yates, 2020, p. 265). Triple threat often refers to performers with equally high-level singing, acting and dancing skills and has been used in a musical performance context since the 1930s (Morton, 2014; Glasheen, 2017). The term has been subject to varying definitions, including describing a choreographer who works in multiple genres and also a creative who is a playwright, actor, and composer (Diamond, 2021; Hodges Persley, 2021). Some argue that triple threat performance roles are most commonly found in the ensemble, with leading roles played by performers with prowess in one domain (The Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), 2013, see Kelly Devine, 1:11:47). However, the multiple skills required for demanding leading roles, such as Jack Kelly in *Newsies* (2011) and Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray* (2002), counter this argument.

Recently, “quadruple threat” has become increasingly common (Diamond, 2021). Although definitions vary, “quadruple threat” refers to a triple threat performer with an additional skill. This might be stage combat, gymnastics, the ability to play a musical instrument, to be funny or even a specific appearance (Diamond, 2021; Nisbet, 2016; Reed & Snyder, 2021). However, successfully pursuing a career in musical theatre both on and offstage requires far more than three or four skills; for instance, performers need vital employability skills to navigate a freelance career (Fenton, 2022). Additionally, the triple threat ideal is “fundamentally exclusionary,” as it perpetuates a single image of a performer who exhibits athleticism, stamina and is “exceptionally able-bodied” (Knapp, 2016, p. 816; Yates, 2020, p. 266). Scholars argue that musical theatre has a long history of presenting those outside the so-called triple threat ideal as “other” and needing fixing or a cure (Knapp, 2016).

Although triple threat is a “staple theatre term,” its exclusionary nature cannot be overlooked (Yates, 2020, p. 267). This thesis attempts to move away from the term to more inclusive language; as such, *core performance skills* is used. Firstly, the phrase is more accurate as it is not used to describe all necessary skills for a musical theatre career, simply

some of the onstage skills. Secondly, *core performance skills* is less confrontational and more inclusive. Thirdly, the term triple threat has been subject to varying definitions in scholarship and thus renders it confusing and limiting.

The first stage in honing performance skills for a musical theatre career is often drama school (Morton, 2015). The competitive nature of the industry begins at musical theatre training institutions, where thousands of performers enrol each year in the hopes of performing on the West End (CDMT, 2022; Diamond, 2021). Training timetables often extend far beyond traditional 9 am to 5 pm schedules with back-to-back classes, rehearsals and performances and often “*student-initiated*” additional rehearsals (Diamond, 2021, p. 129). These intense schedules seek to equip students with discipline-specific skills, preparing them for the demands of eight shows a week (Moore, 2024). However, performers often find navigating the relationship between the three disciplines (singing, acting and dancing) challenging, as many musical theatre training institutions focus on teaching the disciplines separately and then bring the elements together for performance (Fenton, 2022; Morton, 2015). This can create issues of identity, which is highly relevant to well-being, as it “*encourages people to think of themselves as dancers, singers, or actors,*” making it challenging to integrate their skills during performance (Ellison, 1994, p. 217). Furthermore, Morton (2015) describes how often performers do not perform equally in each discipline, resulting in “*dancers who sing*” and “*singers who dance*”. Interestingly, Morton (2015) explores the integration of singing and dancing skills, leaving out the third discipline – acting. This aligns closely with the notion that musical theatre institutions fail to prioritise acting within the curriculum. Some argue this has contributed to the stigma that acting in musical theatre is subordinate to non-musical plays (Diamond, 2021). It is clear that performers must pursue a careful balance between each discipline in hopes of becoming a well-rounded performer.

1.3.3 Singing

The first core performance skill to be discussed is singing. During musical theatre training, students are taught a variety of singing styles and techniques to prepare them for the industry (Asare, 2020; 2022; Moore, 2024). Music education broadly has long conformed to a binary understanding of voice, which excludes those *“whose bodies or identities do not conform to the clear-cut categories of male or female”* (von Germeten & Fielder, 2025, p. 2). The so-called *“Broadway voice”* demands vocal prowess in a huge range of styles, including *“belt”* singing, *“legit”*, *“mix”* and *“contemporary commercial music genres”* (Bassig, 2020; Cox, 2020, p. i; Moore, 2024). There is uncertainty within the literature and the industry on precise definitions of these terms. However, Maxfield and Manternach (2018) differentiate belt as bright, legit as dark timbres and mix as a combination. The traditional musical vocal style was originally a *“vocal expression [that] is a white phenomenon based on aesthetics, social order, and commercial success, even if deeply influenced by African American musical traditions”* (Bonin, 2020, p. 51). This highlights the complex history of singing techniques within musical theatre.

Historically, stigma has surrounded some contemporary musical theatre singing styles, as those in the classical style were hesitant to view the *“belt style”* as *“a legitimate form of healthy voice”* (Moore, 2024, p. 25). However, belting can be healthy and sustainable with proper technique and vocal hygiene (Bassig, 2020; Moore, 2024). There is also an intermediate space between singing and speech in musical theatre, a continuum that includes spoken dialogue between songs and rap that relies on pitch, rhythm and pace (Macpherson, 2024).

Moreover, many roles in musical theatre demand the ability to sing while dancing, which can be especially physically demanding (Deer & Dal Vera, 2021; Zuim et al., 2021). Performers can encounter difficulties maintaining breath control when dancing and singing simultaneously, so often one discipline is compromised (Morton, 2015). Moreover, some shows require vocal stunts, for instance, screaming, and so unsurprisingly many performers

encounter challenges to their vocal health at some point in their careers (Moore, 2024). As such, Moore (2024) calls for greater awareness of vocal hygiene and injury prevention from the first day of musical theatre training. There is a case for instilling this awareness from the beginning of voice lessons, as Moore (2024) suggests even bringing voice professionals to help young high school-age singers navigate puberty and develop healthy singing techniques. Performers navigate a *“highly competitive academic environment”* during training, which extends into the wider industry, and as such, many fear being *“marked”* if they disclose a vocal injury (Moore, 2024, p. 29). Moore (2024) calls for the commonality of vocal injury and disorders to be made visible to students to help combat stigma and for performers to manage their overall well-being as physical, mental and vocal health are all interconnected. Given the *“vocal athleticism and versatility”* required of performers and the prevalence of injury, good vocal hygiene habits should not be understated (Bassig, 2020; Moore, 2024, p. 27).

1.3.4 Acting

As previously noted, a stigma exists that acting in musical theatre is lesser than in non-musical plays. Some see musical theatre as a *“frivolous entertainment”* and claim the style features acting of poor quality (Diamond, 2021; Harvard, 2013, p. 17; Napier, 2008). However, given the emotional power of music, Harvard (2013) argues that centring storytelling around music has the *“potential to affect an audience in a profound manner that can even transcend the impact of a play”* (p. 18). This thesis is not a comparison of the emotional potential of musical theatre versus non-musical plays, but it is vital to recognise the genre’s unique worth, despite criticisms. The stigma surrounding acting in musical theatre is perhaps partly due to the former lack of consistency in acting approach in musical theatre curricula (Diamond, 2021; Harvard, 2013; Napier, 2008; Snider, 1995; Weaver, 2019). The lack of consistency and prioritisation of other skills like dance is surprising given that, as Harvard (2013) argues, *“acting is the glue that holds the art form together. Only when a singer, or dancer, begins to act through their craft does the work truly come alive”* (p. 19). This argument highlights the

importance of acting as a core musical theatre performance skill, as it ties together the other performance crafts.

One of the pioneering systems of acting is the work of Stanislavski; his approach involves the *“physical embodiment”* of the character combined with one’s own emotional experiences (Stanislavski, 1961, p. 85). Many educators still use Stanislavski principles; however, the method has been subject to misinterpretation and debate over whether it can have negative psychological impacts (Daly, 2025; Weaver, 2019). Seton (2010) questioned the long-term sustainability of embodiment, which is explored further in discussions of performers' well-being in Chapter 1.4.1 (Seton, 2007, p. 180). A central challenge to acting in musical theatre is striking a balance between *“dramatic believability and (vocal) integrity”* (Dunbar, 2016, p. 71). Dunbar (2016) emphasises that this varies depending on role and show. Moore (2012) explains that when entering an audition, it is vital that the performers are sufficiently confident in their singing voice to enable them to focus on the expression of the character rather than vocals. Overall, acting in musical theatre is critiqued by some, but the potential of combining acting with singing and dancing can lead to powerful storytelling.

Beyond technical core performance skills, what is commonly sought after in auditions is the *“actor’s essence,”* also known as having *“it”*, the *“x-factor”* or *“performance synergy”* (Cuny, 2022, p. 133; Seton, 2007, p. 170). Although difficult to define, having *“it”* might include a visible passion and self-confidence from the performer as well as the physical embodiment of the character (Cuny, 2022; Flom, 2016). However, factors are largely idiosyncratic and so require introspection from performers. Cuny (2022) argues that musical theatre institutions are responsible for teaching technical core performance skills, but also to help students access their personal energy in hopes of exhibiting the *“x-factor”* and standing out in a competitive industry. Literature fails to adequately emphasise the importance of emotional well-being support required to ensure performers balance achieving an essence and maintaining an identity outside of performance. Overall, the discipline of acting has been shown to be

undervalued within the industry and yet is perhaps the most pivotal in terms of performers' success in auditions and has close ties to emotional well-being.

1.3.5 Dancing

Dance training in musical theatre varies from “*Ballet, Tap, Jazz, Contemporary, Commercial, Pas de Deux, [to] Ballroom*” (Diamond, 2021, p. 21). Despite musical theatre institutions seeking to train performers to be equally skilled in the three disciplines due to the array of dance styles essential for a career in musical theatre, “*dance dominates the curriculum*” (Diamond, 2021, p. 129). Stephens and Wyon (2020) investigated musical theatre performance and highlighted the physically demanding nature of dancing and singing simultaneously. Additionally, research by Morton (2015) provides guidance on integrating dancing and singing skills, with suggestions for plotting breath control in both disciplines. Both papers begin with discussions of triple threat performers, yet only investigate two of the three disciplines, therefore supporting previously discussed notions that acting is the lesser of the three disciplines.

In discussions of the high physical intensity of dance in musical theatre, scholars emphasise the industry's obsession with body image. This can be seen in an interview with a principal of a musical theatre institution who revealed that in the term quadruple threat, they saw the fourth branch as “*what you look like*” (Diamond, 2021, p. 174). Once performers enter the industry, they are judged by casting directors who often “*select or reject performers for first round auditions via their headshots*” (Diamond, 2021, p. 173). This emphasises the influence that appearance has on the casting. Performers often find themselves being associated with a “*type*” such as the “*pretty young lead [and] less-pretty best friend,*” which can be extremely damaging to their identity (Dean, 2005, p. 764). Unsurprisingly, the memoirs of performers and those currently in the industry note a toxic environment surrounding body image, appearance, and weight (Donovan, 2019; Wheatley, 2006). This judgmental environment seems particularly present in shows that feature dance more heavily. He and Martincich (2023)

call for the industry to move away from historical expectations of what a dancer *looks like*, a performer who is athletic and non-disabled and encourage a space where all bodies can be seen as dancers. These factors contribute to the identity and well-being of performers and are present in discussions of performer well-being in this thesis.

1.3.6 Conclusion

A review of the literature concerning musical theatre performance and its history has highlighted the central interplay of singing, dancing and acting within the genre. Many develop these three disciplines during musical theatre training in the hopes of becoming triple threat performers; however, performers and institutions alike have difficulty balancing the three core skills. Furthermore, the triple threat term itself is exclusionary and, for some, aggressive, so striving to become a well-rounded performer with high-level performance skills should be encouraged. Research has also highlighted the emotional difficulty of navigating one's identity through the various disciplines. The wide range of styles required in both singing and dancing provides a unique set of challenges for performers, but perhaps the most complex skill is acting. Literature emphasises the industry's need for performers to have "*it*" and their own actor's essence. This multifaceted phenomenon requires performers to develop individual energy and persona, and without sufficient support, could be based precariously on their own identity. Present again is the stigmatisation that musical theatre is a lesser art form than non-musical acting, which only furthers a cornerstone of this research to provide a platform for the voices of an undervalued group.

1.4 Musical theatre and well-being

Having established the landscape of the genre of musical theatre, key literature and empirical research on performer well-being is now considered. In recent years, music and well-being has been an area of great interest in music psychology research (Osborne et al., 2014).

Investigations have included studies on music performance anxiety (Osborne et al., 2014), as well as physical health and well-being (Kenny et al., 2016), and the impacts pursuing a music career can have on personal life and relationships (Musgrave, 2023). Furthermore, since the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous studies have considered the effects the global situation has had on the well-being of musicians, including orchestral musicians (Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021) and choral musicians (Lozano et al., 2023).

Well-being within musical theatre has been considered somewhat, with numerous studies investigating the well-being of musical theatre students (Curtis et al., 2019; Donahue et al., 2014) and the physical effects of performance (James & Lazarczuk, 2019). Moreover, more recent research by the likes of O'Bryan and Harrison (2024) and Fenton (2022) has explored the culture of the musical theatre industry, but largely remains focused on musical theatre education and suggestions for improvements for curricula. Empirical research into this area remains in its infancy, and in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of musical theatre performer careers, further exploration into the industry is needed. This thesis builds on existing research, developing a framework that uncovers the factors contributing to the psychological cost of a performance career in musical theatre and the impacts of inequities. It also makes recommendations to a wider range of industry groups than research has previously considered, including performers, production teams, training institutions and industry organisations. This thesis seeks to actively challenge multi-faceted industry narratives, including "*the show must go on*" as well as exclusionary language, which is vital if inequities are to be tackled. Given that the research concerning the well-being of professional musical theatre performers remains largely limited, research investigating performing artists across genres is considered in this chapter, alongside musical theatre-specific studies.

1.4.1 Psychological well-being and identity

Well-being is a complex and much-debated concept in research (Lingán-Huamán et al., 2024). There are two central approaches to understanding well-being: hedonic and

eudaimonic. The former considers well-being in terms of *“pleasure and the reduction of pain, giving rise to subjective well-being,”* and the latter focuses on *“personal growth and active contribution, leading to psychological well-being that aims to go beyond mere enjoyment and is related to the pursuit of excellence that gives meaning to life”* (Lingán-Huamán et al., 2024, p. 1). For psychological well-being to thrive, both hedonia and eudaimonia are needed (González-Carrasco et al., 2019). Therefore, investigations into well-being need to consider both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (González-Carrasco et al., 2019); as such, this project investigates both using mixed methods. This study uses quantitative measures of subjective well-being from the hedonistic perspective and considers performers' meaning in their lives through phenomena such as career calling via qualitative methods from a eudaimonic viewpoint.

Key terms in discussions of well-being include burnout and imposter syndrome. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2019) defines burnout as a phenomenon caused by stress in the workplace that leads to exhaustion, mental distancing, and withdrawal from one's job; they do not currently categorise burnout as a diagnosable medical condition. Recent musical theatre research has not considered performer experiences of burnout and how it might impact their careers in the same way music education has (Jääskeläinen et al., 2023). Imposter syndrome can be understood as feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, particularly in relation to workplace successes (Fenton, 2022). Burnout and imposter syndrome are considered throughout this thesis, given the intense schedules and fierce competition that musical theatre performers navigate (Moore, 2024).

Music psychology research has investigated different facets of well-being in varying musical populations. For example, in a large-scale study of professional musicians, Gross and Musgrave (2020) found high levels of anxiety, depression and burnout among the population, due to the precarity of the music industry. The authors cite the nature of freelance work, *“anti-social [working] hours, exhaustion, and, crucially, low or often zero pay”* as key reasons for musicians' impacted well-being (Eynde et al., 2016; Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 13). Musical

theatre performers experience these same pressures from freelance work, something that is explored throughout this thesis (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2024)

A study by Ashton (2021) compared the experiences of musical theatre performers on the West End versus Broadway. Through ethnographic investigation, the authors found that performers on the West End had lower pay and less job security than their counterparts on Broadway. While performers on Broadway are hired for the duration of the show and have a betterment clause, allowing them to pursue other work if they receive a better offer, performers on the West End are bound by an 11-month contract, which has no guarantee of being renewed (Ashton, 2021). On the West End, if the show needs to close for financial reasons, performers are only given two weeks' notice (Ashton, 2021). This type of contract is industry standard on the West End and puts pressure on performers' well-being as many take up additional work or leave entirely, as the unpredictable salary is often not sustainable (Ashton, 2021). For pit musicians in the UK, contracts are far closer to those of Broadway performers, which raises questions as to why onstage performers in the UK cannot have the same considerations if the skill level required is similar (Ashton, 2021).

Additionally, a study by Thomson and Jaque (2015) highlights the worrying prevalence of PTSD among performing artists, specifically dancers. It is believed that the prevalence of mental health problems within the creative industries is only further exacerbated by a phenomenon known as the *"tortured artist"* concept (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023; Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Moyle, 2012). The concept perpetuates a belief that those in the arts must suffer in order to create *"authentic art"* (Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 7). This harmful perspective is thought to have a *"constitutive role"* in forming workers' identities (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023, p. 963). Recent research has sought to challenge this concept and encouraged actors and musicians to develop coping mechanisms to limit the impact of their art on their well-being (Bryers, 2025). This shows the prevalence of mental health issues within the creative industries and suggests that phenomena such as the *tortured artist* only exacerbate these issues further.

Moving in and out of roles can affect performers' identity and psychological well-being. For example, a study by Seton et al. (2019) investigated the well-being of professional actors. The authors found high levels of "*debilitating performance anxiety*" due to the "*cost of shifting identities*" (Seton et al., 2019, p. 137). They noted this was not only in relation to role and self but also in relationships with others and work outside of performing, noted previously as survival jobs. Furthermore, Seton et al. (2019) found that 52% of actors use alcohol as part of their cool-down routine, a potentially highly damaging coping mechanism for managing shifting identity. These findings highlight the change needed on an industry-wide scale, given that socialising often takes place in pubs and bars following performances (Wyver, 2023). These findings provide useful insight into the key factors affecting performers' well-being. However, despite noting the actors' performance genre (theatre, film, television, opera and dance), Seton et al. (2019) provide no analysis of how the factors discussed might impact performers from various genres differently. This is particularly surprising given that the physical demands of performing in musical theatre shows can differ significantly from those of non-musical plays. This is echoed by performer Arthur Hughes, who, in an interview with *The Guardian*, explained that after performances, particularly those he deemed as highly emotionally demanding, he would say "*God, I really need a pint after that'. But I soon found out that wasn't the thing to do*" (Wyver, 2023, para.1). Hughes continued describing a realisation that cooling-down techniques were needed to maintain well-being, such as meditative acts, rather than relying on alcohol and socialising (Wyver, 2023). It seems socialising in pubs has become the industry standard for cooling down, but more formal guidance could provide performers with more sustainable practices to manage their well-being and shifts in identity better.

Research further highlights the challenges of character performance for performers. For example, a study by Thomson and Jaque (2012) found that professional actors may have a "*greater vulnerability for psychological distress,*" which is relevant to all performers, particularly those in roles and productions with emotionally difficult themes (p. 367). As noted in Chapter 1.3.4, actor training often uses Stanislavski's work, which encourages character

embodiment by bringing the actor's own experiences into the role (Brown, 2019). This is reminiscent of method acting, which can be hugely emotionally damaging, with some actors losing their own identity and feeling as though their character has “*autonomy over [their] native personality*” (p. 2). There is widespread agreement within the industry that, without sufficient preparation, method acting can have negative psychological impacts on performers (Panero, 2019). Lovett (2024) notes how actors often bring their own lived emotional experiences into their craft and thus, for many, it is inevitable that an actor will feel something in response to performing or rehearsing. Lovett (2024) calls for more awareness of the importance of self-care and guidance for actors to help them step out of their characters that are so often emotionally linked to their own experiences. There is some evidence that self and character might become even more blurred in musical theatre performance than in other genres, such as film, given the repetition of “*reliving the whole character’s emotional journey night after night*” in musical theatre (Brown, 2019, p. 59; Sherman et al., 2021; Wyver, 2023). Furthermore, findings from Panoutsos (2021) emphasise calls from actors for a more “*systematic consideration of the immediate post-performance phase,*” suggesting institutions should place greater importance on cool-downs to help with leaving a character daily (p. 571).

In addition to the need for cool-down routines immediately post-performance, researchers have long discussed the idea of an “*emotional hangover*” or, more recently, the term “*de-roling*” (Bailey & Dickinson, 2016; Kumar, 2018; Sacay-Bagwell, 2013, p. 23). This refers to performers’ difficulties in leaving a character at the end of a run of performances. Despite researchers identifying the concept of emotional hangovers in the 1990s, change within the industry is slow, and it is clear that performers need a more comprehensive set of tools to cope with leaving a character (Geer, 1993). The emotional hangover of roles could be linked to the emotional content of the show, but also the length of time in a role (Sherman et al., 2021). Musical theatre contracts can last for many years; for example, John-Owen Jones played the title role in *Phantom of the Opera* for 1,400 performances (Thomas, 2023). Research has yet to explore how the length of time within a role may impact the intensity of

an emotional hangover, something this project considers, as well as understanding how performers come to terms with leaving a character.

Sherman et al. (2021) explored musical theatre performers' experience of performing psychologically distressing themes, which is common in many popular shows such as *Les Misérables* (1985) and *Dear Evan Hansen* (2016). The authors found “almost half of the participants described specific impacts on actor well-being from portraying” characters with mental illness, “including physical and emotional exhaustion, interpersonal relationship challenges, and adverse impacts on mood” (Sherman et al., 2021, p. 4). Musical theatre performer Patrick Vaill also noted the physical exhaustion from performing roles with difficult themes, describing the emotional and physical weight of performing eight shows a week (Wyver, 2023). Vaill experienced physical tightness that a physiotherapist claimed could have been their body reacting to and simulating the fear of death from character portrayal. It is also vital to address that touring performers' emotional health can be even harder to manage than static productions due to the lack of routine and changes in venue (Roll & Goffi-Fynn, 2021). Furthermore, touring productions that feature psychologically distressing themes could impact well-being even further, as performers are often away from their families and support networks outside the industry for long periods (Roll & Goffi-Fynn, 2021). Overall, it is clear that musical theatre performance can impact the psychological well-being of performers, with elements such as the emotional content of shows, touring and repeated performance being key contributing factors. This thesis develops a framework outlining the most significant areas for consideration for performers' careers and maintaining well-being.

1.4.2 Physical well-being

Like any demanding performance art, musical theatre performers are prone to physical injury to their bodies, such as their voice and mental health. Research into the injuries suffered by professional musical theatre performers has historically been limited, with seemingly only three studies conducted worldwide before the COVID-19 pandemic (James & Lazarczuk,

2019; Evans et al., 1996; Evan et al., 1998). James and Lazarczuk (2019) studied West End performers, finding high proportions of injuries among the population (65%), with most occurring during performances. Despite the high frequency of injuries, most injuries did not lead to missed performances, which the authors speculate could be due to minor injuries or a stigma surrounding injuries, suggesting that performers adhere to the infamous “*the show must go on*” mentality. The study took place over a 12-month period, so it might have proved interesting to consider whether performers remained in the same contracts for the duration of the study. Given the precarious nature of a career in musical theatre, it is likely that some of the performers changed contracts during the study, which may have affected injury type and likelihood. Moreover, the authors could have asked for the type of shows the performers were part of. This would have provided additional insights, as the physical demands of performing can vary significantly between shows. This thesis uses a qualitative approach to offer a detailed understanding of performers’ physical health, including how inequities impact the physical health of performers differently. This has often been overlooked in previous studies: James and Lazarczuk (2019), for example, did not consider the experiences of disabled performers and how they manage their physical health. The aim is to contribute to growing awareness of well-being within the musical theatre industry, a pressing topic in today’s creative industries (Guptill, 2011; Rickert et al., 2015).

Research into the vocal well-being of performers emphasises the demands of repeated performances, often eight shows a week in musical theatre. For example, in a study by Phyland et al. (2013), musical theatre performers described fluctuations in their voice in both positive and negative ways, such as increased vocal fitness and experiences of vocal fatigue across a performance week. The authors also found that performances on the first and last days of the week were “*more vocally difficult than the midweek performance days*” (Phyland et al., 2013, p. 390.e38). This suggests performers may be pushing their voices more at these times, and so the process of warming up and cooling down may be even more vital. Interestingly, findings by Pacheco and Behlau (2019) suggest female musical theatre

performers might be more susceptible to vocal fatigue and could be *“predisposed to miss work as a direct result of voice-related issues”* (p. 804.e018). A study by von Germeten (2023) emphasises the need for different vocal warm-ups depending on the range required in the role. Given the growing variety of vocal styles within musical theatre, warm-ups are vital in the industry today (Green et al., 2014). Despite research emphasising the value of warm-ups, in a study by Gehling et al. (2014), only *“54.8% [of musical theatre performers] reported consistently warming up [...] and 7.4% reported consistently cooling down afterwards”* (p. 311). More awareness needs to be present within the industry on the importance of vocal warm-ups and cool-downs, given the demands that performers' voices are under, often eight shows a week.

Musical theatre performers have been found to be acutely aware of their voice and any changes that occur to it (Pacheco & Behlau, 2019). Pacheco and Behlau (2019) note that this vocal monitoring is likely fostered during musical theatre training. This raises concerns for those in the industry who lack sufficient training, as they may not be aware of the importance of vocal health and the need to closely monitor the voice to avoid injury (Pacheco & Behlau, 2019). One such group that may lack formal training could be celebrities who are often cast in roles based solely on their popularity to boost ticket sales (Pretorius, 2025). Rosenberg (2022) emphasises how many performers encounter vocal injuries at some point in their careers when they are without support and need to make crucial decisions, such as whether to withdraw from a performance. The responsibility is partly on the production teams to ensure those without formal training take sufficient care of their vocal health. Brown and Thompson (2019) highlight the importance of maintaining good vocal health in order to lead a sustainable performance career. The authors emphasise the need for group rehearsals to be led with a central focus on the vocal health of all performers involved, particularly in the case of intense rehearsal schedules. This is something that is an ever-present part of many musical theatre productions. Therefore, it is the joint responsibility of musical theatre productions and

performers themselves to ensure they have the knowledge and tools to manage their voices and maintain good vocal health.

1.4.3 Anxiety, flow and current well-being recommendations

Music performance anxiety or stage fright is a phenomenon experienced almost universally by performers across the creative industries (Brennan, 2020; Goodman & Kaufman, 2014). The symptoms of stage fright can vary drastically, ranging from mild, including blushing, feeling of butterflies and difficulty focusing, to more severe symptoms such as dizziness, heart palpitations, difficulty breathing and self-harming (Brennan, 2020; Jacobs, 2021). Although some factors that impact performers' well-being primarily affect either performers' physical or psychological health, stage fright is a clear example of the complexity of some issues affecting both performers' physical and psychological well-being.

Although a plethora of research exists on the high prevalence of performance anxiety among musicians, fewer studies have examined the phenomenon among musical theatre performers. In recent years, some studies have investigated symptoms of anxiety and flow in performing arts students, including Bertain (2023), Clegg and Clements (2024) and Curtis (2019). Bertain (2023) and Curtis (2019) found a high prevalence of anxiety symptoms among musical theatre students; 80.5% of 36 participants presented "*clinically significant levels of music performance anxiety*" (Bertain 2023, p. ii). The authors emphasise that examinations and schoolwork could be contributing factors to the high levels of anxiety found among students. Clegg and Clements (2024) found that dance students experienced anxiety before, during and after performances and utilised techniques such as mindfulness to manage their anxiety. For some dancers in the study, anxiety in the wings was replaced, once onstage, by flow state. Being in the *zone* or *flow state* is marked by enjoyment; it is not antithetical to performance anxiety but is negatively related (Kirchner et al., 2011). First developed by Csikszentmihalyi, flow occurs when one is "*so involved in an activity that nothing else matters*" (Robb & Davies, 2015, p. 46). Flow is a complex state that demands the performer's role to

be perfectly matched to their ability; too challenging, and anxiety may ensue, but not stimulating enough, and the performer may experience boredom. These studies highlight the prevalence of anxiety among performing arts students and the close relationship between anxiety and flow and enjoyment in performance. The present study considers professional musical theatre performers' experiences of intense enjoyment in their performance careers and how it might link to a calling.

Robb and Davies (2015) claim that if an actor is experiencing anxiety, then either the level of challenge should be adjusted or the *“actor’s skills brought up to promote flow”* (p. 60). Although these suggestions fit with definitions of flow, they could be difficult to realise, as what makes a role challenging for one actor might be different to another, and skills cannot be simply *“brought up”* overnight to combat anxiety. Furthermore, anxiety is not inherently linked to skill level, as research has highlighted that actors can experience stage fright at any stage of their careers (Brennan, 2020). Conversations with creative teams and performers could be crucial in finding the right balance and promoting flow state. According to Robb and Davies (2015), mindfulness can help actors to focus before shows or during performances if the flow state is disrupted. Brennan (2020) argues that the *“most distressing aspect of stage fright seems to be the negative messages that swirl through our minds”* (p. 31). The present study sheds light on performers' encounters with stage fright and related phenomenon, imposter syndrome, identifying factors that improve or contribute to their experiences. These studies indicate possible high levels of anxiety among professional musical theatre performers, calling for further research into this population.

Jacobs (2021) investigated the prevalence and treatments for stage fright in response to auditions. The study is one of the first of its kind, which is surprising given the high frequency of auditions in musical theatre performance careers and the *“breadth of skills”* that auditions require (Jacobs, 2021, p. i; Walker and Commander, 2017). Stage fright is fueled by perfectionism and self-doubt, two elements often present during auditions when the material is usually relatively new to performers (Brennan, 2020; Goodman & Kaufman, 2014). The

infamous industry narrative *“the show must go on,”* which encourages performers to push through pain and prioritise the show above all else, perpetuates a culture where stage fright is not openly addressed (Brown & Thomson, 2019, p. 2). Jacobs (2021) found that those who completed an 8-week Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) Protocol *“reported lower levels of anxiety and depression, increased mindfulness and acceptance of anxiety symptoms”* (p. i). Perhaps the study's biggest limitation was the low number of participants (3) who completed the 8-week programme. The author notes this was due to financial constraints to compensate performers to take part. This raises the question of why actors were so hesitant to participate; perhaps simply not enough performers were aware of the project, or the low sample size could have been due to persistent stigma surrounding mental health support and therapy. The study featured a high dropout rate (49% dropout), which Jacobs (2021) hypothesised could have been due to scheduling conflicts and travel. Responses to demographic questions, which asked about participants' previous experiences with psychotherapy, could have provided some indication of why participants dropped out. For example, someone who was unfamiliar with psychotherapy might have been daunted by the prospect of group sessions. Despite this, these findings shed light on the possible benefits to well-being of ACT and formal structures of well-being support.

Alongside research into techniques to improve performers' well-being, literature has highlighted the need for greater awareness and education for performers on health and well-being. For example, Fenton (2022) devised a series of curriculum recommendations, including a well-being toolbox for musical theatre students. Fenton (2022) calls for training institutions to place greater emphasis on the challenges students may encounter throughout their careers and how to navigate them, as well as sessions on identity and defining success. Although the recommendations offer useful guidance, Fenton (2022) underestimates the value of relationships with cast members, which can be central in maintaining well-being (Burkhart, 2017). Furthermore, Fenton (2022) regrettably acknowledges their lack of exploration into the careers of performers with protected characteristics and how inequities within the industry

might affect their well-being. Additionally, Brown and Thomson (2019) emphasise the need for all students to gain a more comprehensive understanding of vocal health during training. They explain how knowledge of the vocal tract and key skills needed to maintain the voice across the career lifespan is invaluable to all performers. These studies highlight the need for greater consideration of health and well-being during training to help foster sustainable well-being practices throughout performers' careers.

1.4.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, performing artists face countless challenges to both their physical and psychological well-being. For example, performing psychologically distressing themes can be emotionally and physically draining, and is only further worsened by performing night after night. The frequency of performances can also put pressure on performers' physical health, with high rates of injury among the population and yet, relatively few missed performances due to injury. This speaks to *"the show must go on"* narrative, which encourages performers to push through and perform above all else. Research highlights the prevalence of anxiety among musical theatre students, resulting in calls for greater awareness, action and conversations around well-being within the industry, beginning in training. This project seeks to contribute to discussions of well-being in this under-researched group by identifying the prevalence of burnout and anxiety among musical theatre performers in the UK today, as well as their experiences of flow and intense enjoyment in performing.

1.5 Musical theatre and inequities¹

In the UK, anti-discrimination laws, such as the Equality Act 2010, exist to protect people from being discriminated against based on: *"legally assigned identities such as gender, age and*

¹ As outlined in the personal statement of this thesis I identify as a white, thin, cisgender female, queer, middle-class, dyslexic researcher and acknowledge that I come to this research with immense privilege.

disability and identities which are socially lived or externally perceived such as religious beliefs, race and sexual orientation," known as protected characteristics (Malleon, 2018, p. 600). These laws are in place; however, inequities within the UK's cultural industries, and musical theatre specifically, can affect the experiences of performers with protected characteristics who are often from marginalised groups (Brook et al., 2020). Furthermore, some criticise the Equality Act as outdated, calling for changes to the legislation, including defining institutional racism within the law (Race Equality Foundation, 2024).

In discussing the representation and the experiences of performers with protected characteristics, it is important to define key terms. For example, there is an important distinction to be made between equity and equality: if equality refers to justice in terms of "*sameness*," then equity is justice in "*proportion*" (Banks, 2017, p. 11). In the search for equality in musical theatre and society more broadly, we must address inequities, which are avoidable barriers that can impact performers' careers. A necessary distinction must also be made between the terms representation, tokenism and typecasting. Representation in musical theatre can be understood throughout this project as depicting a social group onstage (Beltrán, 2018). For many, the representation of marginalised groups onstage is just one part of addressing social inequities (Saha, 2024). Tokenism can be understood as representing a select few members of a marginalised social group that, while it may appear to be for the good of the social group, instead excludes those not included (Childress et al., 2024). Typecasting is the casting of a performer based on previous roles or roles associated with their appearance and identity and as a result can restrict performers with protected characteristics to playing roles that fuel oppressive stereotypes, which can impact their well-being (Beltrán, 2018).

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, which highlighted systemic global inequalities, audiences, performers, and scholars alike have demanded greater diversity in the stories being told and representation onstage (Daly, 2022; Stith et al., 2021). Despite these calls, some argue the sector is not seeing any meaningful increase in participation from marginalised groups (Malik & Shankley, 2020; Saha, 2024).

Diversity initiatives often treat greater representation of marginalised groups as the end goal, but instead, increases in representation should be seen as the starting point. Saha (2024) explains how, although representation matters, it does not facilitate the transformation needed in the sector to combat inequities. The way forward is instead through a reparative justice approach, which, unlike diversity, recognises how slavery and colonialism have a lasting impact today. Key to reparative justice is affording cultural producers, or in this case, musical theatre performers, who are from marginalised groups, the same creative freedoms as their white counterparts (Saha, 2024). Current diversity initiatives do not facilitate creative freedom for marginalised creators and so are often restricted to stories that reiterate stereotypical representations of race (Malik & Shankley, 2020). It is important that in discussions of musical theatre careers, the experiences of performers with protected characteristics and how they feel about the industry today and current attitudes around diversity are considered.

A systematic change within the industry is needed, as a notion of “*otherness*” surrounds characters representing marginalised communities (Daly, 2022; Rogers, 2021). There are countless examples of female, LGBTQ+, Global Majority², disabled and fat characters who have been seen as “*tokens or comedic relief*” (McDonald II, 2010, p. 99). This perpetuates heteronormativity, sexism, racism and other systems of inequity within an industry that has the potential to drive forward social change (Barnes, 2015; Masso, 2022; McDonald II, 2010). It is generally understood that individuals can have multiple protected characteristics, resulting in an intersection of identities; this intersectionality can further disadvantage performers within the industry.

² Global Majority refers to all ethnic groups except white, which includes Black, Asian and mixed-multiple ethnicities. Global Majority was “*coined to reject the debilitating implications of being racialised as minorities*” and is more accurate than terms such as “*ethnic minorities*” (Campbell-Stephens, 2021, p. 4). Throughout this thesis Global Majority is capitalised while *white* is written in lowercase, given its connotations to white supremacy. Like all the terminology used in this thesis efforts have been made to use the most inclusive and appropriate language, however, language is continuously evolving and some of the terms used now may be improved upon in the future.

1.5.1 Race and intersectionality

As previously outlined, the origins of musical theatre are steeped in racism, with early shows such as *The Black Crook* (1866) stemming from the minstrelsy style, which featured racist stereotypes of Black people and was common worldwide and in Britain as late as the 1970s (Fenton, 2022). Although pioneered largely by immigrants to America, the musical theatre industry has historically centred around a default of whiteness (Hoffman, 2020; Boffone, 2019). Historically, white men have controlled the industry with great presence in the role of producer, which has resulted in a systematic lack of diversity onstage, both in the stories being told and representation in casts (Neff, 2024). Chua (2022) explains that leading roles have long been awarded to white, non-disabled performers, leaving those from marginalised communities “relegated to cultural stereotypes at best” (p. 151). *Show Boat* (1927) and *The King and I* (1951) are just two examples of classic shows that historically feature racial stereotypes, and even contemporary shows such as *The Book of Mormon* (2011) have been heavily criticised for their depiction of racist stereotypes (Hoffman, 2020).

In Rogers’ 2021 survey of UK actors across the creative industries, almost 80% of performers felt “roles continue to stereotype their ethnicities,” and many performers continue to experience racism both in auditions and the workplace (p. 3). Rogers (2021) also highlights racism backstage with performers experiencing hair and make-up teams that are “unable to cater to their heritage, hair or skin tone” (p. 3). What is perhaps most shocking is that performers largely feel unable to discuss these issues with directors, which highlights an immediate need for greater support and concern for the well-being of Global Majority performers (Rogers, 2021). Although these figures are not exclusive to musical theatre, they paint a concerning picture of the creative industries in the UK today and demonstrate how Global Majority performers must navigate systematic inequities within the industry, something that their white counterparts do not.

Historically, many non-white communities have been misrepresented or entirely left out of musical theatre (Chua, 2022; Galella, 2018). Representation begins with the creatives and

the stories being told in musical theatre shows. A significant figure in the industry, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Latino creator of *Hamilton* (2015) and *In the Heights* (2005), sought to shift diversity in musical theatre (Shishko, 2019). *Hamilton* (2015) tells the story of the American founding fathers through a modern score and a diverse cast of Global Majority performers as white historical figures. Audiences and critics alike widely praised Miranda for leading such a diverse cast and, through casting choices, making American history more accessible and relatable to young people across the world (Shishko, 2019). Miranda's work, however, is not without criticism. Many have questioned *Hamilton's* lack of exploration of the experiences of people of the Global Majority during the American Revolution (Hodges Persley, 2021). Hodges Persley (2021) argues that casting in *Hamilton* does not help in tackling racial inequities and instead emphasises the need for stories of the experiences of Black, Asian, Latinx, Native and multiracial people that do not conform to a "Broadway formula" and pander to white audiences (p. 251). Furthermore, the 2021 film version of Miranda's *In the Heights* (2005) was criticised for its failure to represent the diverse population of *Washington Heights* with its lack of dark-skinned Afro-Latino/a/x³ people, for which Miranda publicly apologised (Helmore, 2021). Despite this, Miranda's shows have been hugely influential and provided visibility to non-white performers and the stories of Latino/a/x people. Musical theatre continues to adjust its stories to accommodate a default whiteness; thus, the need for more stories by and for Global Majority people is evident.

Expanding further on conversations surrounding diversity onstage, a distinction can be made between visible representation onstage and in the story being told. Michael Ahomka-Lindsay, who was the first Black performer to play Emmett, one of the leading roles in *Legally Blonde* (2007) on the West End, spoke about the pressure of stepping into a historically white role saying it was "amazing, great but [ahh-frightening noise] all at the same time" emphasising the importance for audiences to see themselves onstage and how this could change their own perspectives (Ahomka-Lindsay, 2023). He continued, describing the excitement he felt about

³ See Dame-Griff (2022) for a full exploration of terms Latino, Latina and Latinx.

the direction that the industry is currently moving in with greater diversity onstage, but a nervousness not only for this to continue but also to move away from a place of “re-telling” stories and instead a space of “creation” (Ahomka-Lindsay, 2023). Davis (2024) has called for directors to be more conscious of the identity of performers, which includes celebrating the identities of marginalised performers and encouraging them to “infuse their identities in their characters” (p. 60). An example of a show that has been pioneering in this new space is *A Strange Loop* (2022), a semi-autobiographical or “emotionally autobiographical,” as described by writer Michael R. Jackson, musical that tells the story of a writer in a “big, Black queer body” writing a musical about a writer in a “big, Black, queer body;” featuring an all-Black creative team and cast in the original Broadway and West End productions (Akbar, 2023, para. 2). The show not only features a Black lead, but the story being told is actually about Black experience. Producing stories such as *A Strange Loop* helps the industry to move forward and encourage casting which is “diverse, equitable and inclusive for artists of colour [...] and gives members of marginalized groups opportunities to play real, developed characters, not one-dimensional stereotypes” (Davis, 2024, p. 135).

Intersectionality, when a person has multiple identity markers, such as being Black and a woman, is central to discussions of inequity within musical theatre. Crenshaw (1991) was one of the first to address the need for scholarship to consider how social categories may be interconnected (Hudson et al., 2024). Crenshaw (1991) outlined how antiracist and feminist dialogue neglects the experiences of Black women. In the context of musical theatre, there is a “common Broadway trope” for Black women to have limited time onstage but are granted one token show-stopping number towards the end of a musical (Dinero, 2012, p. 30). Dinero (2012) describes these songs as “big black lady songs” that are excessive and serve to wow audiences during the second act (p.30). Therefore, Black women are often deprived of storytelling songs such as the “I want” song, sung by the lead in Act One (Hoffman, 2020). Some musicals, such as *Hamilton* (2016), have attempted to change the landscape and move away from these stereotypes; for instance, Angelica Schuyler’s song in Act One of *Hamilton*

(2016) is a crucial “*I want*” song. However, Schuyler lacks agency in the second act and is othered “*based on intersecting gendered and racial discrimination as a black woman*” (Zwinkels, 2021, p. 25). It is only in recent years that we have seen women of the Global Majority in leading roles in long-running high-stakes commercial musical theatre; for example, Lucy St Louis became the first person of colour to play Christine in *The Phantom of the Opera* in the West End in 2021, despite the show’s 35-year history (Asare, 2020; Wiegand, 2021). The stories told in musical theatre have been written from white perspectives for too long, and the need for change is evident and urgent (Hoffman, 2020).

1.5.2 Gender and body size intersectionality

Alongside racial inequities, musical theatre has historically favoured men both onstage and in creative teams (Barnes, 2015). Many roles available to women lack complexity, simply serving as a love interest for the leading man (Barnes, 2015). For example, shows such as *Legally Blonde* (2007) and *Waitress* (2016) feature leading female roles but ultimately present female characters relying on their male counterparts (Wolf, 2011). Barnes (2015) argues “*when they are not singing about how much they love their men, female characters sing about their longing for men, or how they feel less of a woman without one*” (p. 48). Using the Bechdel and job tests, Lodge (2019) investigated female representation in musical theatre. Used originally for film, in this case, a musical passes the Bechdel Test if two female characters have a sung or spoken conversation about something other than a man. The only element a musical needed to pass Lodge’s (2019) *jobs test* was for at least one female character to have a job. Both tests, some would argue, ask for far too little of musical theatre. For instance, to pass the jobs test, only one female character needed to have a job, which included anything from being royalty to a student. The author’s key finding was that from 1992 to 2016, only 35% of shows on Broadway passed both the Bechdel and jobs test (Lodge, 2019, p. 147). Considering the low test requirements, this statistic offers a shocking insight into gender representation in musical theatre.

Waitress (2016) is a complex example of a modern female-led musical. On the one hand, it was the first of its kind, a Broadway and West End musical with an all-female creative team featuring three female leads (Allen & Wolf, 2023). On the other hand, any hope of female empowerment is lost, as the strength of the female characters comes largely from relationships and financial support from men. The show ultimately concludes with the lead, Jenna, choosing motherhood over her relationship with a man. Allen and Wolf (2023) argue that this reinforces the idea that women can only find true happiness in motherhood. Furthermore, the original casting reinforced stereotypes with a “*white leading-lady [...] Asian sidekick [...] and sassy, Black belter,*” and only casting Global Majority performers outside these confined roles once it had recouped its investment (p. 183). Performers may feel conflicted playing these roles, as, although they see themselves represented in the story, they are presented as one-dimensional stereotypes. This highlights how intersectionality is crucial in discussions of representation in musical theatre. Female performers who have additional protected characteristics are restricted to even fewer roles than their white, non-disabled counterparts. *Waitress* (2016) serves as a marker for the inclusion of women in creative teams, and one hopes it inspires more accurate and empowering stories of women’s experiences. It also signifies the industry still has a long way to go regarding equitable and fair gender and race representation.

Inequities within musical theatre may result in performers’ gender intersecting with their body size. West End performer Charlotte Jaconelli describes how “*current plus-size representation in theatre [...] is mostly stereotypical or non-existent*” (Masso, 2022, para. 3). *Hairspray* (2002) is complex in that it employs problematic tropes, such as the “*big Black lady*” steals the show song and yet was arguably pioneering in its celebration of body diversity. Crucially, the lead character, Tracy, a fat woman, has a story arc that does not centre on a need for her to lose weight. However, leading roles for plus-size performers have remained largely “*non-existent*” as very few actors who played the role of Tracy ever had subsequent leading roles on Broadway again (Donovan, 2019). Industry stereotypes force performers into

categories based on their physical appearance, with those deemed too fat often excluded from the romantic lead role and instead constrained to the comedic sidekick (Kuric Kardelis, 2023; Masso, 2022; Wheatley, 2006).

Some argue that the industry has stricter “*parameters, especially in terms of beauty and age range*” for female performers, while others emphasise the increasing pressures on male performers, with the over-sexualisation of male performers' bodies as a “*product*” to be sold to audiences and “*stigmatisation of fat or oversized performers*” (Carr & Lewis, 2024, p. 760; Kuric Kardelis, 2023, p. 168). Pressures to look a certain way to fit within an industry are a significant issue for many performers. It is no wonder then that many performers experience struggles with body image (Carr & Lewis, 2024). In a report by Reimers (2019), 33% of performers said they had been asked to lose weight for work in the industry. Scholars highlight how these pressures have contributed to the high prevalence of mental health issues related to body image, such as eating disorders, among professional and student performers, calling for greater education on nutrition in musical theatre training institutions (Curtis, 2019; Vitzthum et al., 2013). For the industry to become more inclusive, an increase in representation of more body types needs to be seen onstage and in creative teams. This project seeks to understand how these pressures impact performers' experiences today.

1.5.3 LGBTQ+ representation

Although musical theatre has long been associated with the LGBTQ+ community, it has typically favoured “*white, gay men and drag queens,*” leaving out other members of the queer community (Golemba, 2021, p. ii). LGBTQ+ characters in musical theatre are often based on stereotypes and exist largely in supporting roles (Golemba, 2021; Thompson, 2020; Whitfield, 2020). The representation of trans*⁴ people in musical theatre is even more limited; the few stories that do include trans* characters are often “*written from the perspective of cisgender people, for cisgender people*” and fuel stereotypes further (Mack, 2022, p. iv).

⁴ See Tompkins (2014) for an explanation of asterisk to encompass the diversity of trans*ness

However, LGBTQ+ writers are becoming increasingly more prominent and more LGBTQ+ stories are emerging, with shows such as *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* (2017) and *The Prom* (2016) (Golemba, 2021; Lovelock, 2017). Due to this increase in queer stories onstage, more opportunities are opening up to LGBTQ+ performers to play characters that represent their identities.

Additionally, it is becoming more common to see trans* performers in roles that non-trans* performers might have originated. For example, Michaela Jaé Rodriguez as Audrey in *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982) on Broadway and non-binary performer Baylie Carson in *Six* (2017) on the West End (Duncan, 2023; Zwinkels, 2022). The inclusion of trans* voices in musical theatre greatly benefits the industry as they counteract the binary vocal traditions that exist (Zwinkels, 2022). Despite this, trans* musical theatre performers may encounter a range of challenges as they train and later work in the industry, including gender dysphoria from repertoire and projections of gendered assumptions from creative teams (Gurss, 2020). There is still a long way to go in making roles truly accessible for trans* performers, but the industry, on Broadway and beyond, is certainly starting to move in the right direction.

1.5.4 Disabled representation

This study employs the social model of disability, which understands disability as a social construct. Following the thinking of Hosking (2008), disability is not the “*inevitable consequences of impairment;*” instead, the social disadvantages that disabled people are forced to navigate are a result of the failure of society to meet their needs (p. 7). Theatre companies such as *Graeae* pride themselves on using the social model of disability to talk about the experiences of Deaf, disabled and neurodiverse people (Graeae, n.d.). The social model of disability contrasts with the medical model of disability, which defines disabled people by their “*medical condition as dependent and needing to be fixed, cured or cared for, justifying the way in which disabled people have been systematically excluded from society*” (Graeae, n.d., para. 6).

In 2023, a new musical titled *The Little Big Things* (2023), inspired by the life of mouth artist Henry Fraser, debuted on the West End. The show featured a diverse cast of non-disabled and disabled performers. The lead, Ed Larkin, a disabled actor, noted how he had never seen wheelchair users in the UK's musical theatre industry before and was proud to be part of a production that was "*pushing the boundaries of what's expected on a West End stage*" (Theatre Weekly, 2023, para. 11). The production premiered at the Soho Place, at the time, a relatively new building in the West End, and the only West End theatre that is accessible both for performers and audiences (Hemley, 2024). In recent years, many venues have continued to prioritise accessibility improvements for audiences rather than performers (On the Move, 2023). The representation seen in *The Little Big Things* (2023) signifies positive change away from assumptions that disabled performers somehow do not belong onstage (Yates, 2020); however, it presents one experience of disability and posits a need for more shows to tell other stories of disabled experiences.

Scholars have long criticised the lack of disabled representation in musical theatre, with many disabled roles historically being played by non-disabled actors, fuelling stereotypes and misconceptions about disabled bodies (Yates, 2020). Arguably, the most famous depiction of a wheelchair user in musical theatre is the character of Elphaba's sister Nessarose in *Wicked* (2003). Only in 2025, after 21 years on Broadway, did a wheelchair user play Nessarose, Jenna Bainbridge, and at the time of writing, a wheelchair user has never played the role on the West End (Gumushan, 2025). Parrott (2019) detailed the various stereotypes found within Nessarose's role, such as being emotionally passive, being subject to pity, and lacking agency. The visibility of a disabled character on the surface may seem positive; however, since non-disabled performers so often play Nessarose, this is an example of misrepresentation, which prevents progress towards equity in the industry. The lack of authenticity in the casting of disabled characters suggests the notion of *protected characteristics* seems to vanish in musical theatre, as Davis (2014) argues, "*in what other profession would it be acceptable to discriminate against an identity and get away with it?*" (p.

43). Even when disabled roles do feature in shows, the characters' disability is often their defining characteristic and their narrative is laden with stereotypes, highlighting the lack of true representation of the lived experiences of disabled performers (Davis, 2014).

A few token productions and casting choices provide hope for more equity in casting for disabled performers. For instance, alongside *The Little Big Things* (2023) and the casting of Jenna Bainbridge, some productions have “*showcased innovations in choreography*” and demonstrated that performers with disabilities can and should play roles that are multi-layered and complex (Davidson, 2022, p. 109). Disabled representation onstage is shifting in the right direction, but the lack of accessible theatres for performers and the extremely limited stories of disabled experience highlight the long way the industry still has to go. The issue remains that when there are so few examples of representation for a community, these stories are wrongly judged as representative of the whole community, yet they only speak to just one experience. Research into disabled performers' experiences of the industry is essential, since literature primarily considers accessibility in theatre from the perspective of audiences (On the Move, 2023).

1.5.5 Parenthood and class

According to Brook et al. (2020), the ideal creative worker is “*fit and [non-disabled], able to work long hours at short notice*” and is also “*attached to a specific gendered body*” (p. 247). This emphasises how the creative industries, and by extension musical theatre, have historically favoured childless adults, particularly men who are athletic and non-disabled. American musical theatre performer Mandy Gonzalez described feeling as though she had to choose between being a mother and an actor because of societal expectations, but later decided she felt she could pursue both (SAG-AFTRA (The Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists), 2017). However, with the intensity of musical theatre schedules combined with the lack of job stability and childcare costs, for many, pursuing both parenthood and performance is not an option; this stems from inequities relating

to class and gender (McDowall et al., 2019). Organisations such as Parents and Carers in Performing Arts (PiPA) have formed in the UK due to the lack of provision for parents (PiPA, 2023). A report by PiPA (McDowall et al., 2019) emphasises the immense pressure that parents and carers are under within the creative industries. The report found that parents and carers, on average, earn 13% less than their counterparts without caring responsibilities, and 43% of performers who left the industry *“identified caring responsibilities as the main contributing factor”* (McDowall et al., 2019, p. 5). In a positive step forward, job-sharing is becoming an increasing possibility, making performing in the West End more accessible to parents and other performers with additional care responsibilities (Wiegand, 2021).

Motherhood itself is stereotyped within musical theatre. For example, older female roles are often nameless and simply referenced as *“mother”* (Rigopoulou, 2022). Additionally, Davis (2014) highlights how, in many cases, for pregnant characters, the act of being pregnant is the only dimension to the character. The limited roles that represent mothers lack complexity, which could explain why many mothers and older women withdraw from the industry (Rigopoulou, 2022). Brook et al. (2020) highlight how women are *“made to feel illegitimate whatever their maternal choice”* as they are judged on whether they have children or not (p. 247). Within the creative industries, men can undoubtedly experience difficulties and changes in their lives when entering fatherhood, but it is rarely at the cost of their careers (Brook et al., 2020). This, of course, speaks to issues in society more broadly, but it is particularly pertinent within the creative industries, and the pressures of parenting seem only to be further exacerbated by the intensity of eight shows a week.

1.5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, inequities within the UK’s musical theatre industry are highly complex and interwoven. There is a continuing lack of diversity within production and creative teams, and so, many stories told onstage are filtered through a default white perspective. Without the stories telling of a diversity of experiences, such as Black, Queer and disabled, musical theatre

will remain unrepresentative of performers and audiences alike. Literature has emphasised recent steps forward for inclusivity within the industry, but there is a long way to go before musical theatre casts and creative teams are truly diverse. Within the UK industry, shows such as *A Strange Loop* (2022) have pushed the boundaries of the stories being told onstage but remain, for the most part, an anomaly. Although the presence of inequities within the industry has been addressed, scholars have yet to delve into precisely how these inequities affect the experiences of performers from marginalised communities.

1.6 Literature review conclusion

The current research relevant to musical theatre performers' careers and well-being has been outlined and situated within the surrounding creative and cultural industries. The stigmatisation of the arts and the stigma surrounding musical theatre specifically within the creative industries, has been outlined, as it has historically been seen as lesser than its non-musical counterparts (Savran, 2004). As a result, this research seeks to provide a platform for the experiences of performers from this overlooked style, highlighting the intensity and demands of the careers of musical theatre performers. Current research has also emphasised the complex nature of identities and how performers can struggle to navigate their identity in relation to the various performance disciplines, as well as in conjunction with their personal identity. This research seeks to offer detailed insights and investigate how the nature of repeated performance, particularly of difficult themes, might exacerbate issues of identity and the blurring of self with character. Although literature has highlighted the prevalence of injuries among West End performers, little qualitative data exists showcasing the everyday lived experiences of performers. As a result, this project investigates how performers' psychological and physical well-being may be affected by their work and identifies key priorities for improving their experiences and well-being.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, conversations across the industry appear to be changing cultures within shows and creating new opportunities for performers where there had not been previously. Literature has outlined these recent positive steps in diversity, with greater visibility onstage of marginalised communities. However, this project determines how inclusive the industry is today in reality and explores the career identities of performers with protected characteristics, investigating how inequities may alter their experiences in the industry. This thesis seeks to contribute detailed empirical findings of performer experiences in the form of a novel framework on performer careers to further research and understanding of the UK's musical theatre industry. Alongside industry partners, suggestions are made to inspire change within the musical theatre industry and improve the lives of performers. From this comprehensive review of relevant literature, this study's research questions were developed:

1. What are the key factors at play in performers' experience of sustaining a career in musical theatre?
2. What factors contribute to the psychological cost of a performance career in musical theatre?
3. How do inequities in the industry impact the experiences of performers with protected characteristics today?
4. Where is the potential for positive change in the musical theatre industry?

Chapter 2: Method

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines this project's research approach and methodology, which uses a two-phase, multi-strategy approach. It also details the critical realist epistemology and abductive reasoning that this project employs. Industry engagement was vital to the project's success through partnerships with musical theatre well-being organisations throughout the project and knowledge exchange with industry professionals during the final stages. Finally, information regarding ethical approval and how the project navigated bias and data storage is explained.

2.2 Research approach

This thesis utilised a two-phase approach. The aim was to explore performers' experiences, so a primarily qualitative approach was taken because it "*enables researchers to see the world from the participant's point of view*" (Williamon et al., 2021, p. 31). Through engagement with industry experts, Phase One aimed to provide an overview of the industry, and the possible challenges performers navigate. The findings from Phase One sought to inform the project's second phase by uncovering areas that would benefit from more direct engagement with performers.

Phase Two sought to build on Phase One by engaging with performers through a multi-strategy approach. Phase Two used an explanatory design, which involves an initial quantitative stage followed by a qualitative one to bring additional depth to the interpretation of the quantitative results (Williamon et al., 2021). In this case, the approach began with a predominantly quantitative online survey with an optional closing qualitative question, followed by semi-structured interviews. This design facilitated the opportunity for generalisation from quantitative results and rich qualitative data to understand in more detail performers' experiences (Williamon et al., 2021).

This project utilised a critical realist ontology and epistemology. A critical realist perspective considers the meaning of participants' experiences in the broader context of social structures and causes (Fryer & Navarrete, 2024). Critical realist philosophy advocates for a mixed-method approach because, combined, they can achieve a greater understanding of the mechanisms of the phenomena being explored, in this case, the careers of performers and the effects of inequities in the industry today (Lawani, 2020).

Some critical realists consider their research in terms of three domains of reality (empirical, actual, and real), which separate observed experiences and events, unobserved experiences and events, and unobservable causal mechanisms (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). However, some argue this approach confuses the theory (Elder-Vass et al., 2023). While this research does not precisely define parts of the real, real-but-not-actual, and actual-but-not-empirical, it acknowledges that observable and unobservable phenomena exist (Elder-Vass et al., 2023). As such, this project seeks to uncover a rich knowledge of performer careers, explain how the industry works today and what we can do to address these experiences (Lawani, 2020; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021).

2.3 Data collection

2.4 Phase One

Procedure

A systematic snowball sampling approach was used to recruit participants. First a recruitment plan was developed, which involved making a list of the current and recent musical theatre shows on the West End and regional theatres, and the corresponding industry professionals associated with each production. I approached hundreds of industry experts via email, from across these productions. I also engaged with the industry partner organisations of this study; three members of these organisations were interviewed as part of Phase One. The emails included brief introductions to the research and why they might be a suitable participant. At

this early stage, participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form to ensure they were comfortable with what the study involved and to provide them the opportunity to ask any questions. Participants received no financial incentive for taking part. Particularly, in the current economic climate it was a difficult decision in choosing whether to compensate participants for their time. However, I sought to engage with professionals in the most unbiased way, and given that financial bias can impact participants responses the decision was made to not compensate participants for their time. Following the interviews, I then asked for recommendations of other experts who might consider participating in the study.

The aim was to conduct ten semi-structured interviews to keep Phase One focused and within an appropriate time frame. Following a semi-structured interview approach allowed for areas of interest that arose during interviews to be expanded upon in the moment (Williamon et al., 2021). The interviews touched on issues in the industry that could be emotionally challenging to talk about, including cast dynamics and representation. Therefore, a semi-structured approach gave participants the time and space to be candid with their experiences on these challenging topics, something that methods like focus groups might not facilitate. Semi-structured interviews can be challenging to conduct, particularly as a postgraduate research student, as they require advanced skills such as picking up on the cues of the interviewee and when to move on, navigating unexpected responses, dealing with silence and trying to remain unbiased (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). These skills were developed and improved throughout Phase One and into Phase Two.

During the interview stage, interviewing and transcribing took less time than anticipated, and after receiving more email responses, the study expanded to 14 participants. All interviews took place online, primarily due to convenience, as most interviewees were based in and around London, the central hub of musical theatre in the UK, far from my university. I built a rapport with all participants before commencing the interview to help them feel at ease. I asked them how their day had been and also reminded them of the purpose of

the interview and that, in line with the consent form, their data would be pseudonymised as soon as possible.

The interviews aimed to contribute to a preliminary understanding of the musical theatre industry today, its culture, and the demands experienced by performers. The experts were expected to outline current factors impacting performers' well-being and the current support available.

Participants

For Phase One, a sample of 14 adults who had experience within the UK's professional musical theatre industry was recruited; all self-identified as a musical theatre *"industry expert."* Participants had a variety of expertise from across the industry, from well-being practitioners to musical directors (Table 1 shows a breakdown of roles). The sample included participants with a range of experiences within musical theatre. Some spoke of decades of involvement within the industry, while others only a short number of years.

Table 1: *The roles held by musical theatre experts interviewed for Phase One*

Role	N	Pseudonym
Musical Director	5	George, Hannah, Jessie, Kennedy, Leo
Well-being Practitioner	2	Bailey, Francesca
Musical Theatre Educator	1	Andrew
Company Manager	1	Neil
Choreographer / Director	1	Isaac
Current performer	1	Charlie
Ex-performer	1	Daphne
Ex-Musical Director	1	Elliot
Union representative	1	Mae
Total	14	

No demographic information was gathered in Phase One of the project. In retrospect, it would have been beneficial to learn of participants' ages and backgrounds to better understand their perspectives. However, this was understood and implemented in the larger-scale Phase Two.

Materials

Due to the flexibility of the semi-structured approach to expand on different areas, interviews ranged from 20 to 65 minutes. The interviews centred around four key topics: the industry today; how roles and content might impact performers; identity and the experiences of marginalised performers; and current well-being support. The questions were open-ended, such as "*Could you explain whether the industry has changed in any way over the course of your career?*" and were designed to be expanded upon with impromptu follow-up questions (for the complete list of expert interview questions, see Appendix 1).

This stage of the project acted in some way as a pilot, as numerous lessons were learned from the design (In, 2017; Majid, 2017). For example, in the writing of interview questions for Phase Two, questions regarding the culture within casts were rephrased because some interviewees in Phase One had been unsure of the terms used.

2.5 Phase Two

Procedure

Phase Two began with a survey, which was used as both a recruitment tool for generating interest for interviews and a method to provide quantitative data to build upon in the qualitative stage of Phase Two. A snowball sampling technique was used to distribute the Google Forms survey. Similarly to Phase One, I developed a recruitment plan for Phase Two, developing an extensive list of theatre organisations, agents and networks that could be paths for recruiting performers for the project. The survey was first sent to partner organisations and experts

previously involved in Phase One, who were asked to distribute the survey to their networks. Social media was also used to reach potential participants by sharing the survey widely with musical theatre reviewers and other professionals with large social media followings. I also distributed the survey to training institutions and their networks, as well as, engaging directly with industry performers on social media. The survey began with information about the project and consent. The survey featured demographic and musical theatre career-specific questions, such as whether participants were currently in contract (in a show). At the end of the survey, participants were invited to volunteer for a follow-up interview. During initial email correspondence, potential interview participants were provided an information sheet and consent form at this early stage to ensure they were comfortable with what the study involved and to enable them to ask any questions.

Of 105 survey respondents, 49 responded to an optional open-ended question, allowing participants to explain their survey responses. This qualitative data was analysed alongside the interview data. The number of participants who volunteered for a follow-up interview by providing their email addresses was 37. The aim was to interview a similar number of participants as the pilot, as the data was rich yet manageable, so a provisional figure of between 10 and 20 interviews was decided. Following Braun and Clarke (2021c), it is important not to predict precise data saturation (*“the point at which no new information, codes or themes are yielded from data”*) before data collection and instead be flexible and organic during the process of data collection (p. 202). For project planning purposes, having an estimate was crucial, with the understanding that data saturation would be reached when deemed appropriate using *“interpretative, situated and pragmatic judgment”* (Braun & Clarke, 2021c, p. 211). Of those who volunteered, 24 were contacted by email, of whom nine never responded, while 15 responded and took part in an interview. After 15 interviews, it was decided that data saturation had been reached and, so 13 of the survey respondents who volunteered were not subsequently contacted.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for Phase Two, as the method worked well and seemed to make participants feel at ease when talking about industry challenges in Phase One. At the start of the interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the interview and told that their data would be pseudonymised as soon as possible. As in Phase One, participants received no financial incentive. No participants were concerned about the project's aims, but numerous expressed anxieties about anonymity. I reassured participants that their names and any peers or colleagues they mentioned would be under pseudonyms and that any identifiable information regarding shows would be redacted.

The 15 individual performer interviews all took place online. This was again mainly due to location, as many performers were London-based. Individual interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The length variation was due to the semi-structured approach, which allowed performers to provide as much detail as they were comfortable with and facilitated follow-up questions. The 49 survey responses and 15 interviews were analysed following the reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun & Clarke (2006), detailed later in section 2.6 of this chapter.

Participants

Phase Two sought to engage with professional musical theatre performers. There were originally 108 survey responses. Of the respondents, three were ineligible to complete the survey because they answered “no” to the question: *Are you a professional musical theatre performer in the UK?* This left 105 complete responses. Even though 23 participants' most recent or current show was non-musical theatre, they still identified as musical theatre performers and thus were eligible to take part.

Regarding demographics, there were more males than females (Male $n = 54$, Female $n = 50$, Non-binary $n = 1$), and the average participant age was 31.54 years old. Most participants were white (white $n = 78$, Mixed or Multiple background $n = 12$, Black, Black British or Caribbean or African background $n = 9$, Asian and Asian British $n = 4$, Prefer not to say $n = 2$). Ten participants identified as having a disability (including a specific learning difference),

93 had no disability, and two selected “*prefer not to say.*” Participants had a variety of levels of training, but only one had no formal training. Almost 90% of participants attended drama school to some level ($n = 94, 89.52\%$).

When asked “*Which term do you identify with most?*” the most common label was *Triple Threat* (33.33%), followed by *Performer* (26.67%) and *Actor* (20.95%). Despite *Triple Threat* being the most popular term, scholars have long criticised the term as competitive and exclusionary (Knapp, 2016; Yates, 2020); as such, the term “*performer*” is used throughout this thesis as it was deemed the most inclusive term for describing those onstage in musical theatre.

Table 2: *Sociodemographics of survey respondents (n= 105)*

	Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	54	51.43
	Female	50	47.62
	Non-binary	1	0.95
Age	<21	4	3.81
	21-25	20	19.04
	26-30	33	31.43
	31-35	22	20.95
	36-40	9	8.57
	41-45	9	8.57
	46-50	2	1.90
	>50	6	5.71
Ethnicity	White	78	74.28
	Mixed or Multiple background	12	11.43

	Black, Black British or Caribbean or African background	9	8.57
	Asian and Asian British	4	3.81
	Prefer not to say	2	1.90
Disability	No	93	88.57
	Yes	10	9.52
	Prefer not to say	2	1.90
Training (can select multiple)	Attended drama school for undergraduate	44	41.90
	Attended drama school for undergraduate and had training during childhood/adolescence	26	24.76
	Attended drama school for postgraduate	14	13.33
	Training informal/ formal during childhood/adolescence	8	7.61
	Attended drama school for undergraduate and postgraduate	5	4.76
	Attended drama school for undergraduate, postgraduate and had training during childhood/adolescence	3	2.86
	Attended drama school for postgraduate and had training during childhood/adolescence	2	1.90
	Other (private coaching, university electives)	2	1.90
	No formal training	1	0.95
Total		105	

Table 3: *Demographics of interview participants of Phase Two (n = 15)*

	Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	9	60

	Female	6	40
	Non-binary	0	0
Age	<21	1	6.67
	21-25	2	13.33
	26-30	4	26.67
	31-35	3	20
	36-40	2	13.33
	41-45	2	13.33
	46-50	0	0
	>50	1	6.67
Ethnicity	White	8	53.33
	Mixed or Multiple background	3	20
	Black, Black British or Caribbean or African background	3	20
	Asian and Asian British	0	0
	Prefer not to say	1	6.67
Disability	No	10	66.67
	Yes	5	33.33
	Prefer not to say	0	0
Training (can select multiple)	Attended drama school for undergraduate	8	53.33
	Attended drama school for undergraduate and had training during childhood/adolescence	5	33.33
	Other (private coaching, university electives)	1	6.67
	Training informal/ formal during childhood/adolescence	1	6.67

Attended drama school for postgraduate	0	0
Attended drama school for postgraduate and had training during childhood/adolescence	0	0
Attended drama school for undergraduate and postgraduate	0	0
Attended drama school for undergraduate, postgraduate and had training during childhood/adolescence	0	0
No formal training	0	0
Total	15	

Table 4: List of participants who contributed qualitative data that formed part of the findings of Phase Two (n= 21)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Career identity label
Aaron	Male	24	Performer
Bella	Female	20	Performer
Calvin	Male	37	Actor
Dawn	Female	39	Performer
Ethan	Male	44	Performer
Fern	Female	26	Performer
Gregory	Male	51	Performer
Harry	Male	27	Triple threat
Isabel	Female	42	Triple threat
James	Male	32	Triple threat
Kenny	Male	22	Triple threat
Lucy	Female	31	Actor
Mason	Male	35	Triple threat
Nathan	Male	28	Triple threat
Olive	Female	29	Triple threat

Poppy*	Female	25	Dancer
Quinn*	Female	27	Triple threat
Ross*	Male	35	Triple threat
Sean*	Male	30	Triple threat
Thea*	Female	31	Actor
Una*	Female	29	Performer

*Note. * Indicates participants who answered the additional qualitative question in the survey but did not take part in a follow-up interview*

Materials

The survey (see Appendix 2) consisted of sociodemographic, career-centred questions and three pre-existing validated scales: the WHO-5 Well-being Index (WHO-5; Topp et al., 2015), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI; Kristensen et al., 2005). The three scales were chosen for four key reasons. Firstly, the pre-validated scales are used frequently throughout various research areas, and each measures a different facet of subjective well-being (see WHO-5, Alessandri et al., 2020; Loveday et al., 2023). Secondly, the three scales all feature relatively short questionnaires. This allowed the survey to consider different aspects of well-being whilst not overwhelming participants and increasing the likelihood of question fatigue. Thirdly, the WHO-5 and SWLS are most effective when used in conjunction with other measures (Kusier & Folker, 2021; Lingán-Huamán et al., 2024). Finally, previous research on performing artists has used the scales, facilitating the comparison of results. The CBI comprises three scales: personal, work and client-related burnout. Personal burnout is defined as *“the degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion experienced by the person,”* and work burnout is the same but specifically concerning their work (Kristensen, 2019, p. 1). Client-related burnout refers to participants' fatigue and exhaustion related to work with clients; for

example, for medical doctors, this would be their patients. Musical theatre performers do not interact with one specific client group, so only two out of the three burnout scales were used: personal and work burnout (Kristensen, 2019). Furthermore, in order to generate an overall burnout score, participants' personal burnout score is recommended (Kristensen, 2019). In this context, participants' personal burnout scores were used when assessing the relationships between the three well-being scales (WHO-5, SWLS and CBI).

The individual interviews followed a semi-structured approach based on eight sections, including performers' experiences in early careers, discussion of their current or most recent role, and feelings towards work-life balance (see Appendix 3 for a complete list of semi-structured interview questions).

2.6 Data management and data analysis

All interviews took place online via Google Meet, so interviews were transcribed first using the built-in transcription software and then edited by the researcher. Early on in the analysis, it was decided to keep the speech patterns intact in transcripts rather than editing for clarity. Given that this research investigated the lived experiences of performers and industry experts, verbatim quotations added to the humanness of the participants. Moreover, it showcases the nuances of how the performers spoke during interviews and highlights frustrations and uncertainties at times.

Participants were allocated pseudonyms alphabetically based on when the interviews took place. Pronouns were used in accordance with participants' publicly displayed pronouns on Actor Spotlight or social media and websites. Once a complete draft of the thesis was written, I gave participants who had provided consent to be contacted regarding the project's progress, the chance to review their contribution, their allocated pseudonym, and the pronoun used to ensure they were comfortable.

The transcriptions were then analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) present reflexive thematic analysis as a

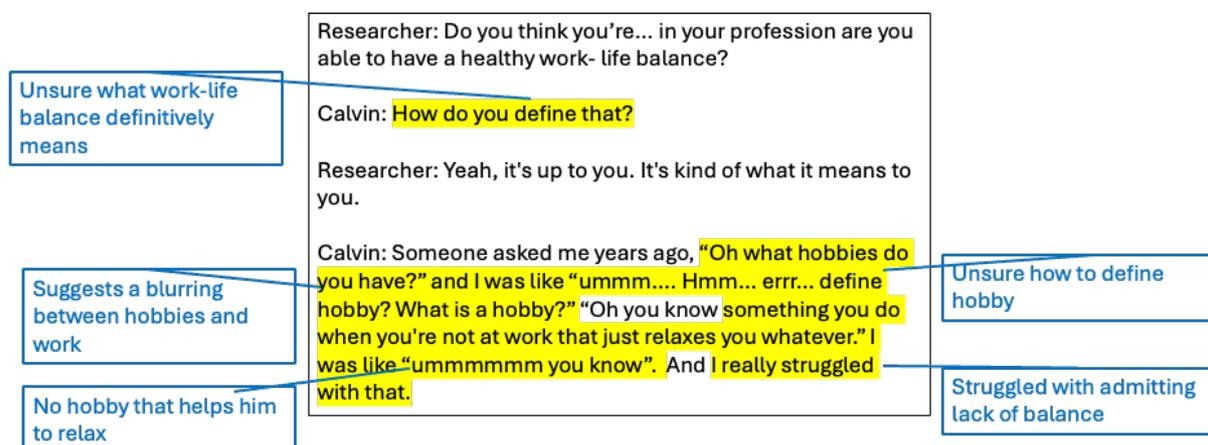
methodology that can be used within numerous epistemological and ontological paradigms, from essentialist to constructionist. As such, a study utilising a critical realist epistemology could apply Braun and Clarke's (2006) method directly. However, numerous critical realists have offered alternative approaches to thematic analysis that some argue align more closely with the critical realist epistemology (Fryer, 2022; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). This project largely followed a standard reflexive thematic approach but with abductive reasoning to reach conclusions (Fryer & Navarrete, 2024). Abductive qualitative research involves the development of themes that are *"guided, but not determined, by existing theoretical understanding"* (Thompson, 2022, p. 1415). Therefore, the analysis was shaped by the data itself, Phase One, and existing literature. For example, theoretical contributions from this study were built upon an existing framework developed by Fenton (2022).

Reflexive thematic analysis seeks to identify patterns of participant experiences and generate a broad, rich understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The approach allows for the individuality of interview participants and their unique experiences to be respected, as well as acknowledging the researcher's own role in interpreting the data (Byrne, 2022). Thematic analysis was chosen over other qualitative methodologies, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), for numerous reasons: the sample was relatively large in both phases (Phase One, 14 interviews and Phase Two, 15 interviews); the aim of analysis was to identify patterns across the data rather than highlighting unique features in case studies; and crucially, the research questions sought to go further than investigating personal experiences, aiming to situate them in the larger context of the industry and develop practical recommendations (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

Similar to a worked example of reflexive thematic analysis by Byrne (2022), a combination of semantic and latent coding was used. This aligns with the abductive reasoning approach associated with critical realism as it allows for participants' perspectives to be presented and, where necessary, a deeper meaning also to be extracted (Thompson, 2022).

Thematic analysis offers flexibility, which is useful for this project, given the broad topics covered in discussions of musical theatre careers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexive thematic analysis begins by gaining familiarity with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since I transcribed the interviews, this familiarising stage involved re-reading the transcripts several times. It also involved reading the qualitative responses from the survey in Phase Two multiple times. The data was analysed in NVivo 14.24.0, a software commonly used in qualitative research (Thompson, 2022). The transcripts were thematically coded for the first time. Coding involves writing a concise summary of “every point of significance” in the data (Thompson, 2022, p. 1413). Figure 1 shows an example of an initial code from Calvin’s interview. The code formed part of the *challenges to work-life balance* theme, highlighting the blurring between hobby and work. Codes were changed, condensed, and expanded on, which is part of the process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

Figure 1: An example of initial coding for a section of the interview with performer Calvin.



Candidate themes were developed from these codes, and then the final themes were chosen (see Figure 2 for the process of developing themes in Phase Two). Developing candidate themes involved numerous hand-drawn paper diagrams to make sense of the data. After several tries, the candidate themes were streamlined by observing any overlaps. For

example, performers' experiences of rejection fit within the candidate theme that explored career calling. Afterwards, the sub-themes of each candidate theme were refined.

Upon reflection, the existing candidate themes felt like data topic areas rather than comprehensive themes. Even though the data itself had clear patterns, the candidate theme names did not convey their deeper meaning. Braun and Clarke (2021b) discuss this common error, explaining that themes hold together data that is "*united by a central concept*," whereas data topics are responses to a subject that is presented as a theme but has no shared meaning (p. 341). After much consideration, the candidate themes were reconceptualised based on the original six concepts, so that the unifying meaning from each theme was drawn out more clearly. This led to the final iteration of themes (see Figure 2). A challenge came with presenting the recommendations from the findings. The recommendations were previously part of the theme of "*communication and clear pathways of well-being support*." However, the recommendations encapsulated far more than this theme allowed. Moreover, having "*recommendations*" as its own theme was not possible, as recommendations covered a variety of issues that lacked a common central concept. Thus, "*recommendations*" were developed as part of the larger project conclusions in Chapter 5.3. The final themes for Phases One and Two are shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, respectively, which are accessible visual data displays. The data displays present each phase's themes in a circle as they connect and combine to help explain performers' careers today.

Figure 2: Diagram showing the process of developing themes in Phase Two

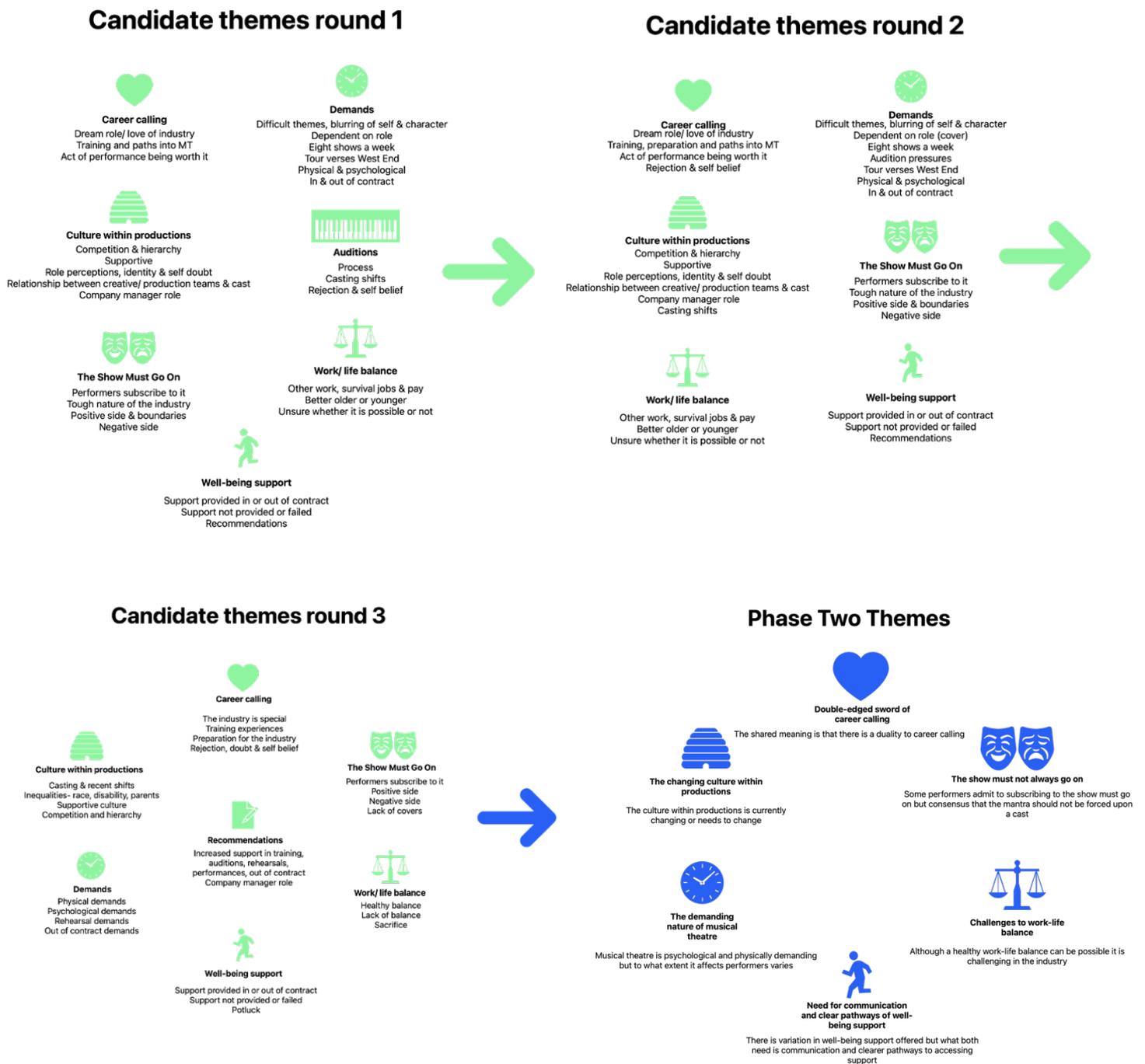


Figure 3: Diagram showing Phase One's five themes broken down into sub-themes.



Theorising is the penultimate stage of analysis. This stage involved explaining the relationships between themes and phases of the project (Thompson, 2022). Phase One followed a predominantly inductive approach, which sought to generate a preliminary understanding of today's industry. Phase Two followed a more explicit abductive reasoning approach, as the analysis was “*guided, but not determined, by existing theoretical understanding*” (Thompson, 2022, p. 1415). Previous findings in Phase One and existing research were combined to explain the relationships between Phase Two themes. Findings were then written with clear quotations to support them, followed by conclusions. Throughout all phases, notes of potential industry recommendations were taken, which were combined and presented in the *industry recommendations* found in Chapter 5.3.

The quantitative survey data was analysed using SPSS Statistics software. The data was first tested for normality and was deemed normally distributed, so standard statistical tests were used in the analysis. The Kurtosis for each well-being scale was between -1 and +1,

which suggests the data is normally distributed: Personal Burnout (-.358), SWLS (-.876), WHO (-.045). Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationship between each well-being measure. Then, the mean scores were calculated for each well-being measure and compared to those of previous research. A series of independent sample t-tests were conducted to test whether there were any statistically significant differences between variables such as gender and age for each well-being measure. The quantitative results were presented and then interwoven into the write-up of the themes, as qualitative data provided insights behind the results.

2.7 Partnerships

During the project's first year, I approached various industry organisations and community interest companies, and after email discussions and online meetings, two partnerships were established. I developed a separate contract for each partnership. There was no financial benefit to either party. Instead, the partnerships were centred around knowledge exchange and collaborating to improve the industry. During the project's first year, I spoke with the organisations to get a sense of their work and the possible avenues I could consider with the research. I observed a group well-being session with a production led by one of the partner organisations. This shadowing opportunity provided me with some additional tacit knowledge of the industry and the type of support that productions can utilise. This played a small part in informing the focus of the project, which was primarily guided by the gaps in current research. Price (2017) warns of the risk to a study's academic integrity when tailoring a project to the exact needs of an industry partner. I retained complete control of the project within this study, including its aims and methods.

I engaged with the partner organisations when there were updates to the project, approximately three times per year. This allowed me to have the support of industry organisations, yet a critical distance away from the industry. The partnerships were hugely

helpful in recruiting participants, developing recommendations and disseminating findings. Three of the participants in Phase One worked for the partner organisations. The interviews for Phase One took place within the first year of the partnerships. The partner organisations have chosen not to be named in the thesis to ensure anonymity of their teams and production affiliations.

2.8 Knowledge exchange with industry professionals

Alongside Phases One and Two, the project was presented to industry professionals for feedback. I organised a conference-style day during the final year of the project, which was hosted by a musical theatre training institution. The day sought to generate a sector response to inform the research further. The conference aimed to bring together professionals from across the musical theatre industry to share knowledge. A total of 24 representatives from across academia and the industry attended, including performers, musical theatre lecturers, activists, vocal coaches, well-being practitioners, psychotherapists, physiotherapists and researchers.

Key findings and recommendations from this project were presented to attendees for feedback, alongside two other presentations, one from a leading industry organisation and another from a disability activist and access consultant. After each talk, there was a question-and-answer session, additional discussions in small groups and a larger whole-group discussion. Despite the intense demands of the musical theatre industry, discussions throughout the day had an underlying optimism, largely focussed on challenging language such as the *“triple threat”* label and inaccessibility in the industry. Many of the professionals I engaged with were already considering how language is used, inclusivity and working on initiatives to improve support for performers. Crucially, there was an appetite for more conversation and action to continue. The day sought to allow all attendees the opportunity to share their knowledge and network with other professionals with a common interest of improving the industry, as such following the event I created a spreadsheet with the contact

details of professionals who wished to remain in touch. General notes were taken during the day to help inform the recommendations, and there was also a feedback questionnaire that attendees could complete. The number of attendees who completed the reflection survey was eight; seven were via an online Google Form, and one was via a Google Meet conversation. The feedback was analysed using the same reflective thematic analysis of Phases One and Two and helped to guide the recommendations.

2.9 Ethics and minimising bias

This study was approved by the University of Sheffield's Ethics Reviewers. All participants gave informed consent to participate, whether in the survey, interviews or written feedback from the knowledge exchange day. The data was stored according to the Data Management Plan devised at the start of the project.

Numerous steps were taken in an attempt to minimise bias in the project. For example, it is essential to recognise personal bias as an audience member and researcher, coming to this research project rather than as a performer. In one sense, my lack of lived experience as a performer was beneficial, as there was a sizable distance between my life and the performers I was investigating. Additionally, as an audience member of West End and regional musical theatre shows, I carry preconceived notions of what a performance career entails and the possible challenges. However, as an outsider to the industry, my lack of tacit knowledge brings with it no prior personal industry experiences that could affect my research, reducing confirmation bias, for example, when engaging with performers or during abductive reasoning in the analysis stage.

Additional steps were taken to avoid bias during data collection. The semi-structured interview questions were written to be open-ended to avoid any acquiescence bias. To limit recall bias in the interviews in Phase Two, I focused sections of the conversation on performers' most recent or current contracts. However, it was, of course, also relevant to discuss the length and breadth of performers' careers. The well-being scales in the survey

were based on participants' well-being in the past two weeks, which helped to avoid recall bias during the quantitative stage of Phase Two. To reduce interviewer bias, I tried to build a rapport with interviewees in the correspondence before the interview by being friendly and accommodating and having a calm and warm presence during the interview. I tried to remain warm yet formal during interviews to ensure the participants felt they could speak openly and without judgment (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). Moreover, I reminded participants at the start of interviews that their names would be pseudonymised to limit social desirability bias. Using pseudonyms helped participants to speak truthfully and helped to avoid any concerns they might have about how others would perceive their experiences. Selection bias during both phases was navigated largely by arranging interviews based on response time. Selection bias was challenging to navigate as Phase Two engaged with performers who remained in the industry. This highlights one of the key future directions of this study, which is to engage with performers who have left the industry and their experiences.

Braun and Clarke (2021b), authors of reflexive thematic analysis, have addressed critics' questions of bias in their method. For example, Braun and Clarke (2021b) argue that researcher subjectivity is a "*resource for knowledge production*" rather than a limitation of the method (p. 334). Underestimating the value of researcher subjectivity implies a lack of understanding of the purpose of this type of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

Chapter 3: Phase One

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents Phase One of the project, engagement with industry experts, which investigated industry cultures and sought to reveal key issues that impact performers' careers. Through reflexive thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, five themes were developed:

1. Early career challenges
2. Mid to late career challenges
3. Repetition with musical theatre performers' careers
4. Culture within productions
5. Support and survival

Experts were open in discussing today's industry and its culture, detailing both elements they agreed with and things they would seek to change. They commented on the factors they see as impacting performers' careers, speaking from their experiences engaging with performers in an educational setting, backstage, during the creative process of a show, or in a well-being capacity. These findings are crucial to building a picture of the industry and provide a preliminary understanding for later engagement with performers in Phase Two.

3.2 Theme 1: Early career challenges

Theme 1 outlines the challenges that musical theatre industry experts associated with performers' early careers. The theme can be broken down into two specific sub-themes: challenges when performers enter the industry, and preparedness for eight shows a week.

3.2.1 Challenges entering the industry

In the 14 expert interviews, all participants to some degree spoke of the competitive nature of the musical theatre industry in the UK. Some also noted how this competitive environment can impact the well-being of performers, particularly during their early careers. Aligning with current research, several participants explained how the high-pressure competitive atmosphere begins in drama school and continues throughout training and into the industry (Cox, 2020). For example, Musical Director Kennedy stated: *“Getting into drama schools, you know not everyone can get into drama schools [...] To get through the door to auditions, getting agents, that’s a different [story], that’s also a challenge.”* Kennedy detailed the various stages early-career performers face as they try to enter the industry. The competition at each stage speaks to the *“continuous cycle of audition and rejection”* that Walker and Commander (2017) previously highlighted (p. 262; Seton et al., 2019). The pressure to secure agent representation intensifies if performers do not secure work immediately. Musical theatre educator Andrew described how performers feel as though *“if it doesn’t happen immediately, it may not happen. They may not be entirely wrong because it seems to be the case that the market absorbs them very, very young.”* Andrew implied a pressure to gain almost overnight success upon graduating. Although new graduates might feel used to competition, the pressure only intensifies upon graduation. Furthermore, the pressure to secure work immediately could amplify negative emotions when performers inevitably encounter rejection. These findings provide initial insights for this study into the competitive nature of the industry, and the repetitive challenges performers face from the outset of their careers.

Experts noted that comparisons with peers could further worsen experiences of rejection. For example, experienced performer Charlie described the culture of comparison among performers: *“Looking down on yourself and comparing yourself to all your friends or your peers.”* Charlie points to a key issue associated with the enclosed nature of the industry, that for many performers, their *“friends”* are also their *“peers”*. This might further exacerbate feelings of competition, as performers may feel constantly surrounded by others and their

successes. This is perhaps why numerous interviewees emphasised the need to maintain connections outside the industry. Similarly, Seton et al. (2019) found that actors experience anxiety over competition with peers and, subsequently, pressure to secure upcoming work. Overall, performers encounter emotional challenges as they enter the industry; the most significant is how competitive it is and how navigating comparisons with peers is an added complexity. Experts explained that pressure from oneself is not the only factor performers must navigate.

Another challenge faced by early-career performers is appearance pressures. For example, union representative Mae stated, "*The image of being that stick thin dancer and you mustn't eat [...] after a while it makes you very ill in all respects physically and mentally.*" Mae speaks to the issues of eating disorders, which are documented as a significant challenge for performing artists (Szabó et al., 2019; Vitzthum et al., 2013). Mae went on to explain how, historically, appearance pressures have primarily affected women; however, the pressure to "*look a certain way, to be a certain size for the industry*" is also affecting young men. This mirrors current literature, which notes the appearance pressures of women to be significant and those on men to be ever-increasing (Kuric Kardelis, 2023; Troop & Upitis, 2008). Appearance pressures tie in closely to casting trends, which can have huge implications for performers' career longevity (Kuric Kardelis, 2023).

With the growth of social media, there has also been a rise in online abuse towards performers (Masso, 2020). Kennedy alluded to the potential pressure of outside opinion from musical theatre fans: "*social media people do vocalise their views and thoughts on certain casting.*" One high-profile example of this is musical theatre performer Carrie Hope Fletcher. Fletcher spoke publicly about the online hate she endured as a result of comparisons made between her appearance and the performer who originated her role in *Heathers the Musical* (2018) (Todd, 2018). Therefore, performers must not only contend with broad sweeping stereotypes of what a dancer or a performer *should* look like, but they must additionally navigate comparisons with performers who previously performed in a role.

3.2.2 Preparedness for eight shows a week

An overarching viewpoint among interviewees was a sense of scepticism about how emotionally and physically prepared new entrants to the industry are. This is despite such large numbers of performers attending training institutions (CDMT, 2022). Numerous experts mentioned notions of career calling, hearing performers *“going after that thrill”* of performing (Andrew). However, performers were reported to be emotionally unprepared for the realities of eight shows a week. For example, Musical Director George stated, *“Lots of people think they’d like to be in a West End show. Lots of people think that right up until the point they’re in it.”* Ex-performer Daphne also spoke of the difficulty navigating *“your dreams suddenly become your job.”* She explained, *“There’s this switch, that happens at drama school where what started as your hobby and your passion suddenly becomes your work.”* Here, experts alluded to discrepancies between how a musical theatre performer’s career is perceived and the reality, as well as the challenge of navigating the adjustment from hobby to career. New entrants to the industry can be shocked by the expectations associated with performing eight shows a week. This aligns closely with authors such as Fenton (2022), who call for greater education during training on the realities of the career. For example, maintaining relationships with those outside the industry and navigating the portfolio nature of the career. These findings begin to uncover the importance of career calling for musical theatre performers.

Unsurprisingly, in following one’s dream, literature highlights many positives associated with pursuing a career calling, such as increased life meaning (Dobrow et al., 2023). However, challenges can also arise; for instance, identity can become intrinsically linked to work (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023; Cinque et al., 2021; Seife, 2022). Furthermore, experiences of a calling can decline as soon as one begins pursuing the career path (Dobrow, 2013). Having a career calling and passion for the industry does not necessarily prepare performers for the realities of eight shows a week and instead can be detrimental. This is because a calling can create false expectations of the industry, making performers emotionally unprepared for the realities of the career. The prevalence of career calling and how it impacts

performers' experiences of the industry is explored in greater detail in Phase Two of this project.

Experts noted the physical challenges early-career performers also encounter. For example, Andrew noted, "*The toll that it [performing] can take on the voice is a little unexpected.*" Moreover, Company Manager Neil emphasised how training can fail to teach performers "*how you can sustain yourself and not get injured.*" This highlights the well-known physical demands of the industry on the body as a whole and the voice specifically (Stephens & Wyon, 2020; Zuim et al., 2021). Although Neil was referring to learning how to physically sustain oneself, it is undoubtedly crucial that early career performers are also equipped in how to maintain their emotional well-being (Wanke et al., 2012). This unpreparedness to cope with the physical and emotional demands of the industry is crucial to the well-being of early career performers. Therefore, a greater awareness of how to deal with rejection and maintain both physical and emotional stamina could be vital in reducing the "*psychological cost*" of a career in musical theatre (Walker & Commander, 2017, p. 262).

Theme 1 has highlighted the specific challenges performers can encounter during their early careers. Experts highlighted how performers must navigate rejection, competition and their dreams becoming their work. From expert interviews, the crucial role of training institutions in sufficiently preparing new entrants to the industry is evident. Career calling is a key concept associated with early career and links to why performers choose to pursue musical theatre. There is a demand for greater awareness during training and early career of the emotional and physical toll that a musical theatre performance career can exhibit, supporting previous authors such as Fenton (2022). Industry preparedness and career calling were further investigated in Phase 2, as seen in Chapter 4.3's discussions of performers' first-hand experiences.

3.3 Theme 2: Mid to late career challenges

Theme 2 outlines challenges more prevalent in the middle to later stages of a musical theatre performer's career. The theme can be divided into establishing a name and ageism, and financial pressures.

3.3.1 Establishing a name and ageism

Experts emphasised the constant challenge of creating and maintaining a *name* (i.e. creating a known reputation) in the industry. As previously outlined, the industry is fiercely competitive; thus, establishing a name can prove difficult. Experts outlined how maintaining a name can be a further challenge. For example, Musical Director Leo stated, *"Keeping your name in people's minds, I think that's the thing [...] and staying in the game long enough to [...] Also, just getting your name out and creating, establishing a reputation."* The phrase *"staying in the game"* reiterates the competitive nature of the industry and implies it is an ongoing challenge throughout a career in musical theatre. It also emphasises the importance of securing consistent work in order to be recognised and maintain a presence in the industry. If a performer does not have work secured at the end of a contract, they risk casting teams forgetting their name and losing their ranking within the *"game"*. How this pressure to secure work and avoid rejection impacts performers' well-being is explored in Phase Two, Chapter 4.3.

Even with an established name, Musical Director Hannah emphasised how ageing can greatly impact a performer's casting. Hannah spoke of how, as performers *"age out of specific roles,"* they can encounter challenges finding where they *"fit"* in the industry. Rigopoulou (2024) explained that performers face the persistent challenge of maintaining a reputation in order to secure work. Although experts highlighted this issue, they did not mention any support available to performers. This parallels current research, highlighting a lack of tailored support

for musicians through career transitions (Oakland et al., 2013). The musical theatre industry is unique in casting as it so often seeks “*exceptionally able-bodied*” young performers with a highly athletic “*triple threat*” skill set (Rigopoulou, 2024; Yates, 2020, p. 266). These demands are exclusionary for many, including older performers who may be unable to cope with the physicality of the performance style (Nobis, 2015; Raisborough et al., 2022; Rigopoulou, 2022). Ageing can evidently affect performers' casting bracket, but how performers navigate where they “*fit*” within the industry remains unclear.

The lack of roles available to older performers further intensifies the challenge of maintaining one's place within the industry. Experts described the industry as “*especially ageist*,” particularly compared to other performance styles (Daphne). A recent high-profile example is Nicole Scherzinger, who took on the iconic role of Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (2023). Scherzinger explained that her biggest concern when taking on the role was judgment for her age and being seen as an “*old hag*” (Marks, 2023, para. 9). This mirrors the plot of *Sunset Boulevard* (2023), which depicts an ageing star's dream of a return and experience of ageism. Ageism is most evident in the lack of representation and limited roles for older performers. Musical Director Jessie explained the difficulties performers face as the “*availability of roles*” is based on “*what's in fashion at the time*” and is almost entirely out of the control of performers. Of course, “*what's in fashion*” changes continuously in society; however, shows featuring young, athletic leads seem to remain fashionable (see *Oliver!* (1960), *Hairspray* (2002), *Billy Elliot* (2005), *Newsies* (2011), *Everyone's Talking About Jamie* (2017), etc). Experts described the lack of roles available to older female performers: “*There are not enough female characters for elder, female roles*” (Choreographer and Director, Isaac). Rigopoulou (2022) echoes this and explains that the available roles are often nameless, simply representing a mother or grandmother and lacking in character development. The second stage of this project further investigated performers' experiences with casting trends and how the availability of roles impacts their well-being and identity (see Chapter 4.4).

3.3.2 Financial pressures

Experts highlighted the financial pressures experienced by many performers and wider creative industry freelancers. For example, ex-Musical Director Elliot described parallels between his job role and those of performers, stating, *“Every six months, I thought, ‘Oh right, my contract [is] not going to be renewed. Oh God, what am I gonna do?’”* Elliot points to a lack of control that freelancers encounter in their careers and how it can cause significant anxiety. Creative freelance careers are well documented as being economically unstable, something that has continued to worsen in recent years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis (Morgan, 2022; Nørholm Lundin, 2022; Van Assche & Laermans, 2022). Freelancers can experience anxiety due to temporary contracts and the precarious nature of the creative industries (Maxwell et al., 2018). However, financial pressures are further exacerbated for creatives who work in London-centred industries (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2022). This is due to the high cost of living in the capital, which Daphne described as *“extortionate.”* London’s West End is one of the epicentres of musical theatre globally, which means many professional musical theatre performers in the UK must contend with the capital’s high cost of living (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2022). The impact of these financial pressures on psychological well-being is explored in subsequent discussions with performers.

Additionally, there are specific financial challenges that are unique to musical theatre performers. For example, experts emphasised the cost of maintaining core performance skills associated with musical theatre. These include dance classes (Leo), regular physiotherapy and vocal massages (Andrew). Hannah explained: *“Like the maintenance of performing is a lot, like you have to have regular physio[therapy], some shows will provide that, so that’s great, but I think if you have to have regular physio, that can be expensive, buying shoes, buying equipment, buying whatever you need is, can be quite a lot.”* These costs can amount to large expenses, which can be a burden if not provided by the production or when outside contract and the cost must be met by the performer. These costs contribute to the financial stress of being a freelance performer. Research into the well-being of actors by Szabó et al. (2022)

found that higher financial stress was associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress and lower life satisfaction. The second stage of this project aimed to focus further on these financial pressures and provide a more detailed understanding of their effects on performers' well-being.

Many performers are forced to find additional work to compensate for the financial instability of a career in musical theatre. This is a key issue associated with acting careers that is well documented (Donovan, 2023; Seife, 2022; Throsby & Zednik, 2011). Experts differed in what they called this work; however, the term “*survival job*” is used for this thesis (Donovan, 2023, p. 523). The reason for this lies in Hannah’s description, “*people usually, even on the West End, have to take on a second job to be able to afford life, really.*” The need for additional work in order to “*afford life*” suggests a sense of desperation, and thus the significance of the term *survival*. Moreover, it posits a lack of control within musical theatre careers, as performers may have no choice but to find additional work due to financial instability. The most common survival job cited by experts was work in hospitality. This supports the persisting trope of performers as waiting staff (Maxwell et al., 2018). This type of work can enable performers to have a flexible income that still facilitates their pursuit of their performance career (Throsby & Zednik, 2011).

Survival jobs are a more pressing issue for certain performers than others. Mae noted how the need for survival jobs primarily affects ensemble performers, stating, “*If you're not playing those [leading] parts with the wages that come with it, what happens is you're doing a second or third job.*” She continued describing how swings and understudies, in particular, have been historically “*undervalued, underpaid, [and] overworked to the point that this is ludicrous.*” Echoing Mae’s concerns, the actor’s union, Equity, has recently campaigned to secure an increase in the wages of swing performers (Equity, 2023). A 2023 report on freelancers across the sector found widespread feelings of being undervalued as well as financial precarity, and the need to take on additional work outside the industry (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2023). In Phase Two of the data collection, performers shed light on

financial pressures and whether more needs to be done to facilitate leading a sustainable career in the capital (see Chapter 4.5.5 in regard to survival jobs and Chapter 4.8 work-life balance). From these findings, Phase Two sought to engage with performers in roles across casts, including swing and understudies, as those outside the principal parts could be experiencing greater demands, navigating multiple roles onstage and multiple sources of income offstage.

Experts spoke of the relationship between survival jobs and identity. Survival jobs were reported as a more significant issue when the majority of a performer's income came outside the industry. Daphne explained, *"It can be really, really difficult [...] for you to feel like you are still an actor even if you're in between acting jobs."* Daphne highlights that some performers' identity is intrinsic to their work, as they question whether they are still performers if they are not currently in contract. Research has previously explored identity-based income within samples of actors (Maxwell et al., 2018; Robb & Venning, 2018). Performers may question whether they are actors/performers if their livelihood does not rely on acting work, which could subsequently negatively impact their well-being (Nobis, 2015). Not all performers, however, concur with this viewpoint. Leo explained this when he stated:

"I've met both types of people. Folks who go, "I'm an actor but I just work at the cafe for, you know, x amount of hours" [...] I've also met people who go "I don't know if I'd call myself an actor because I'm not act [pause] because I'm not working.""

For some performers, their career identity fluctuates depending on whether they are currently in contract or working a job outside musical theatre, while others see themselves as actors regardless of where their main source of income comes from. Inequities within the industry show that Global Majority freelancers earn 17.19% less than white freelancers, which suggests survival jobs could be more pressing for performers from marginalised groups (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2023). Engagement with performers in Phase Two sheds

further light on survival jobs and how financial precarity affects performers (see Chapter 4.5.5).

In conclusion, performers can face numerous challenges during their mid to late career. Experts highlighted ongoing issues of ageism that seem to particularly affect female performers. There is pressure for performers to establish a reputation and if they can *stay in the game*, they are forced to navigate casting brackets and constantly identify where they fit within the industry. Financial precarity is widely regarded as a source of anxiety in freelance careers, so its presence is unsurprising in the careers of musical theatre performers. A common issue embedded in theme 2 is how financial pressures trigger a lack of control in the lives of performers. This is evident from the uncertainty surrounding temporary contracts and the nature of financial pressures that can force performers into working survival jobs. The second stage of this project provides further exploration into how this lack of control affects performers' psychological well-being and identity, and what measures can be taken to navigate and improve the situation.

3.4 Theme 3: Repetition with musical theatre performers' careers

Theme 3 outlines the nature of repetition within musical theatre performers' careers, from auditions to rehearsals, to performances, and how experts believe it impacts performers' well-being.

3.4.1 Auditions — Rejection, resilience and identity

A fundamental part of a musical theatre performer's career is auditioning. While success can come from auditions, so can rejection. The nature of rejection and its challenges have already been explored concerning early-career stages. Interviewees, however,

emphasised how the cycle of rejection can be a central feature of all stages of a musical theatre performer's career. Experts noted how the repetitive and frequent nature of auditions can be challenging. Kennedy claimed that some performers may audition “20, 30, 40 times, 60 times over two years” without success. Although this high frequency of auditions seems extortionate, research supports Kennedy's claims with some performers auditioning as much as 10-15 times a week (Fenton, 2022; Flom, 2016; Jacob, 2021). Isaac questioned the number of audition rounds that performers often have to go through. He explained:

“Does it ever really need to be eight rounds of an audition? I would argue that there doesn't. But I understand that within those rounds that the UK team watch it, then the US producers will watch a round and then [pause] and so it's about the layers of which those processes happen. But is it a waste of people's time, probably? Because they're not probably getting paid for it.”

Here, Isaac described the audition process of commercial international shows, including the voices of numerous production teams during auditions. Weiss and Gaffney (2015) previously spoke of the complexity of audition rounds and the lengthy process involved before performers even have a chance of receiving a payment. Auditions can evidently be extremely repetitive and time-consuming. How these long processes affect the day-to-day well-being of performers was explored further during Phase Two.

Experts emphasised the need for resilience to cope with this continued rejection and expectations of audition panels. For example, Leo noted that it needs

“a lot of strength, resilience, to sort of put oneself through that [...] it takes a lot of mental fortitude, to hold true and to stay strong and to believe in the fact that opportunities will come even if they don't come straight away.”

He continued and explained the difficult balance that performers must navigate: *“you want to morph yourself to be what the casting panel want you to be and are looking for [pause] whilst also bringing a bit of your personal self into that show.”* It seemingly becomes a guessing game of trying to be *“what the casting panel want you to be”* while attempting to remain unique

as a performer. Subsequently, some performers may feel pressure both to conform and simultaneously stand out. This supports previous research by Seton (2007), which also emphasised the challenge actors face in balancing their own identity with trying to have the “x factor” that casting panels seek (p. 170). This highlights the psychological demands of auditions, as some performers may try to constantly adapt to suit audition panels. Overall, auditions are a central part of a musical theatre performer’s career. A challenge is balancing a performer’s identity with the expectations of an audition panel, while maintaining a resilient mindset to navigate the demands and requirements of auditioning.

Throughout the interviews, experts used various terms to describe onstage musical theatre professionals. For example, Kennedy explained that he uses the term “*triple threat*” in private discussions within the creative teams as “*a quick way of saying what you need, but I think that’s an unhelpful term in the wider world.*” Kennedy acknowledged that triple threat is unhelpful in some contexts, perhaps due to its confrontational and aggressive tone. Furthermore, recent research has begun to outline the exclusionary nature of the term, particularly against disabled performers (Knapp, 2016). Kennedy continued, emphasising how different roles can demand different skill sets:

“Most of the time [...] the leads where they are more actor singers, sometimes more singers than actors, and sometimes more actors than singers. Whereas, they don't need to dance as much because their function, and a role, and what they're there for is, mainly to deliver the singing, and they don't need to dance particularly [...] And equally there are some other shows where they are more danced based, so therefore we need more technical dancers so they may not necessarily be the best singers but their function within the show isn't there to deliver beautiful vocals ”

Kennedy highlights the diverse nature of musical theatre styles, with the physical requirements of roles varying considerably. Leading roles, for instance, demand less dance ability than ensemble tracks, implying that a constant industry desire for triple threat performers is not necessarily accurate (Diamond, 2021). Given the variety of roles available, it is important that

performers present themselves authentically in auditions to secure roles that suit their skill set most effectively.

This links closely to concepts of identity, as Isaac notes, there has been a “big conversation around it”. He explained:

“By being called a performer, it was a lesser [...] term. And you are therefore not as good as an actor. And there was a lot of people who were in [non-musical] plays going “Oh no no no, we’re actors and they’re performers.” And it was like, well no, they [musical theatre performers] understand the text, they understand the form, they study acting. When you’re singing, you’re not singing, you’re acting through song. When you’re dancing, you’re dancing through song.”

Here, Isaac speaks of the interconnectedness of the three musical theatre disciplines, singing, acting and dancing. Isaac argued that musical theatre students study acting just as their non-musical theatre counterparts do, and so also deserve to be called actors. This brings to mind the historical stigmatisation that exists against musical theatre, that the style is *lesser* than non-musical theatre (Diamond, 2021). Other experts, such as Hannah and Well-being Practitioner Francesca, used the terms “*actor*” and “*performer*” interchangeably. Similarly, research often does not clearly distinguish between non-musical and musical theatre actors/performers (Fenton, 2022; Seife, 2022). The term performer is used throughout this thesis, as it encompasses all musical theatre performance professionals, from those with skills in singing, acting, and dancing to those with greater expertise in one or two of the disciplines. Overall, discussions surrounding the terms used to describe performers are complex. It is also ultimately the choice of the individual musical theatre professional as to which term they most identify with.

3.4.2 Rehearsals — Day after day

Professional musical theatre productions often have intense rehearsal periods, as industry experts spoke of how performers can find rehearsals extremely demanding. For example, Elliot described the “*weeks and weeks of technical rehearsals*” for a tour, working “*from 11 to 11, just doing scene after scene.*” Rehearsals can be both emotionally and physically exhausting due to long hours and the nature of continuously rehearsing scenes, seemingly without sufficient breaks. Elliot recalled his experience from over two decades ago, which is important to note as retrospective evaluation can be unreliable (Phylant et al., 2013). It is clear, however, that one of the defining features of Elliot’s experience was the sense of non-stop rehearsal days. Other experts also emphasised the long hours associated with rehearsal periods and how they can vary drastically between shows. Leo spoke of a “*hugely welcomed*” recent Equity union agreement (Equity, 2023) that demanded a two-day weekend during rehearsals, which signifies a growing awareness of the intensity of rehearsal periods and the importance of time off. Performers must have sufficient time off during this period to allow for rest from the demands of rehearsing and to ensure they do not burn out before performances even begin.

Another challenge performers can encounter during rehearsal periods is managing social expectations. Francesca likened entering rehearsals to the “*first day of school every time they [performers] go into a new production.*” This implies a sense of apprehension and nervousness to make a good impression on peers and production teams. Musical director Leo echoed this when he described needing to prove himself when entering a production, stating, “*Every show is different, so you start from scratch from day one.*” These statements speak of the socially draining nature of productions, as performers must build relationships each time they enter a new cast. Performers might feel pressured to quickly develop these relationships to ensure they feel comfortable within a cast. Previous research points to the speed at which a company can become like a family due to the intensity of rehearsals (Fenton, 2022). Early

rehearsal periods can feel like an incredibly high-pressure environment to fit in with peers and make good impressions.

Additionally, experts spoke of the need to maintain connections with cast mates and attend “*obligatory, Friday, Saturday night, cast drinks,*” as Francesca said, “*you’ve got to, right?*” Seton et al. (2018) argue that post-performance drinks are one of the few ways performers can network. According to discussions with experts, performers may feel a similar pressure to network during rehearsal periods. This would align with research by Fenton (2022), which suggests a performer’s personal life “*has to go on hold*” during rehearsals (p. 543). Therefore, rehearsals can bring with them unique challenges. In a positive move, a growing awareness of the need for sufficient breaks is evident in the prevalence of discussions in the industry around ensuring a two-day weekend (Hemley, 2022). It is being acknowledged that performers require time away to rest from demanding rehearsals and the additional requirements of social interactions following long rehearsal days.

3.4.3 Performances — Eight shows a week

While performers encounter demands during auditions and rehearsals, perhaps the greatest challenge to well-being comes during the performance process. Experts noted the pressure performers can feel during eight-shows-a-week performance schedules. Elliot explained that in a week, “*Mondays are like Saturdays. You give 100%.*” Ensuring each performance is to the same high standard is an expectation put on performers. A concern comes from the looming threat that if a performer is unable to meet these demands, they will simply be replaced. Additionally, George said explicitly that “*everybody has to be replaceable.*” This speaks to the financial pressures on productions. For a show to be economically sustainable in the long term, producers must ensure their productions do not rely on one performer. Shows that use celebrity or stunt casting techniques to increase ticket sales often only feature their star performer for a limited time (see example of Sara Bareilles cast in *Waitress the Musical*

(2019) for a limited time, Gans, 2020; Pretorius, 2025; Santan, 2009). This is because it is simply not sustainable to put one single performer under pressure to perform eight shows a week for an extended period. Following the notion that all performers are replaceable could also further intensify the pressure to perform. These findings begin to uncover the machine of commercial musical theatre; performers must be replaceable, as in the event of injuries, another performer must be able to take their place for the show to go on at the same high standard.

Performance requirements can further increase the demands of performing eight shows a week. For example, Andrew explained, *"If you're the lead [pause] you'll have to take care of your voice and your body in different ways [...] you're expected to sing the big song at the end of Act One."* Performance demands vary considerably within a production and between shows (Fenton, 2022; Phylant et al., 2013). Neil described, *"The main challenge is [pause] learning what is sustainable and how you can sustain it yourself and not get injured."* This demonstrates the individual's responsibility to understand their physical limits and know when they can and cannot perform. This is echoed by research that emphasises the need for performers to be aware of vocal dose (i.e. level of use of the vocal folds) and see themselves as athletes developing a mindset that encourages training, warm-ups, cool-downs and recovery (Flynn, 2025; Gaskill & Hetzel, 2017). However, given the connotations of an athletic mindset to *win at all costs* (Sabin, 2020), instead a *mindset that prioritises well-being*, might be more appropriate and offer more clarity on the aim of the approach. The physical demands of performing eight shows a week can be intense, and it is the responsibility of performers to determine what they deem as sustainable. Utilising support structures such as vocal coaches can help performers find what is comfortable for them (Flynn, 2025). This emphasises the crucial role that education and awareness during training have in ensuring performers are equipped to lead sustainable careers as well as support for performers in the industry.

In addition to physical demands, performing in a musical theatre production eight shows a week can impact performers' psychological well-being. The potential psychological

impacts of performing in shows with difficult themes revealed significant differences in opinion among experts. An example of a show with difficult themes is *Dear Evan Hansen* (2018), which includes themes of depression, anxiety and suicide (Sherman, et al., 2021). Some experts hold the belief that a performer's well-being can remain unaffected by performance if there is sufficient support in place. For example, Kennedy stated, "*You're acting, you're inheriting a different character. You are not being [...] there are enough resources out there to help actors [pause] detach themselves from those difficult conversations and difficult themes.*" Isaac echoed that "*if the rehearsal process is dealt with correctly then no you shouldn't [be affected by themes] because you'd always know that that's onstage and this is offstage, and you have that delineation of life.*" Dealing with difficult themes in the rehearsal process "*correctly*" could mean providing support and ensuring sufficient time to allow performers to discuss the show's content. Crucially, there is a clear awareness that without sufficient support, performers can be impacted by difficult themes. Kennedy acknowledged that some performers may find certain conversations and topics "*difficult.*" It is clear that experts realise performing in a show with difficult themes *shouldn't* impact performers, but it can. Reactions to performing difficult themes could be largely dependent on the individual, their identity and experiences. Performing difficult themes is a complex issue discussed in greater detail with performers in Phase Two of this project (see Chapter 4.5.3).

In contrast, George argued that discussions of difficult themes are irrelevant to musical theatre. He said "*Musicals don't tend to cover those sort of harrowing things [seen in Television & film]*" so production teams do not need to be concerned with the psychological well-being of performers. Francesca sharply contested this when she said, "*I think there is a bit of a misconception that musical theatre doesn't have trauma in [it].*" In reality, any show could be psychologically challenging for a performer. This links to a wider stigma surrounding musical theatre that the genre is not *serious*; however, this assumption is misguided, as throughout its history, musical theatre has been used to communicate messages of social justice (Browne,

2022). This stigma could prevent performers from receiving sufficient support if production teams are unwilling to acknowledge difficult themes.

Navigating a psychologically challenging theme is exacerbated by the repetitive nature of musical theatre performance. Daphne explained that with *“TV and film there is limited exposure, but we're talking about telling a story, eight shows a week, for a year.”* Here, Daphne emphasised the uniqueness of the style; repeating a story every night for a year could be extremely challenging for a performer to navigate emotionally. This is worsened if performers feel they lack the tools to manage such themes. Hannah, described working with a young performer:

“Tim said it was really difficult to do it eight times a week, especially when you have to do that kind of stuff [difficult themes] twice a day. It really takes its toll because you have to just get into a place where it feels real. And so, he is desperate for his next role to be like a comedy role or something, he’s like ‘I’d just really like to not do that [perform difficult themes].”

Hannah spoke of how performing can feel *real*, which undoubtedly can impact the emotional well-being of performers. Performer Tim had reached his limit in performing difficult themes, which suggests he was close to burnout. His experience highlights how it is important for performers to vary the type of shows and content they perform to help their career longevity. To some extent, Tim used method acting, as he got *“into a place where it feels real,”* an approach that some training institutions encourage (Brennan, 2020). The approach involves embodying a character and relating to one’s own experience, which is well-documented as something that can impact performers’ well-being. Aligning with Tim’s experience, literature highlights how performers often struggle to separate themselves from a character (Bradley, 2019; Kumar, 2019; Sherman et al., 2021). Performers can also find it challenging to leave a role behind, whether at the end of each performance or a run of performances, referred to as an *“emotional hangover”* (Sacay-Bagwell, 2013, p. 23). The negative effects of an emotional hangover are well documented and so literature points to the importance of de-roling (Geer,

1993; Kurtz, 2011; Panoutsos, 2021; Sacay-Bagwell, 2013; Seton et al., 2019). Overall, performer well-being can be affected by performing in musical theatre eight shows a week. Factors such as schedule, the content of a show, and a role's demands can all impact the well-being of a performer and are explored further in Phase Two.

Performing in musical theatre can be a dream come true for performers. For example, Well-being Practitioner Bailey said she had never *"met a performer who doesn't love what they're doing."* Leo expanded on this when he explained, for some performers, *"it's the thrill of putting something on every night and performing in front of an audience and sharing their gifts with an audience."* Performers may differ in their motivation to perform, albeit for themselves or the audience, and yet, experience joy in performing (Simmonds & Southcott, 2012). When describing the emotions they associate with performers, experts cited *joy, buzz, love, intense feeling, physical, dream, validation, tribe, thrill, connection, and catharsis*. These emotions evoke notions of career calling, as performers seem driven by intensity and passion for performance (Fenton, 2022; Seife, 2022). Research highlights the life meaning that pursuing a career calling can provide (Duffy & Dik, 2013). These findings highlight the positive aspects of performing in musical theatre that coexist with the aforementioned demands associated with performance careers. These findings suggest performers remain focused on their dream of performing to such an extent that they overlook any challenges, something that is explored throughout Phase Two.

In conclusion, theme 3 highlighted the various emotional and physical demands of auditions, rehearsals and performances. A commonality shared between each stage is the nature of repetition. Experts emphasised the central theme of repetition with the frequency of auditions, long hours of rehearsals and eight shows a week performance schedules. Perhaps the most significant challenge to the well-being of performers is the performance of difficult themes. Although experts had different perspectives on the impact of difficult themes, overall, without sufficient support performers can become affected by psychologically demanding roles. There is a growing awareness of the importance of de-roling in steps to avoid developing

an emotional hangover. Despite this, some within the industry still perceive musical theatre to be without trauma and free from psychologically difficult themes. This could be linked to the stigma surrounding the style's content because musical theatre is not *serious*, it lacks emotional depth. It is clear, however, that while performing can be rewarding, the negative sides of repeated performance should be more widely acknowledged, and steps should be taken to increase awareness of available support.

3.5 Theme 4: Culture within productions

Theme 4 highlights the culture within productions. It uncovers the complex, temporary family-like relationships that can occur within productions. The theme also uncovers perceptions within casts towards role responsibilities and identity.

3.5.1 Temporary family within productions

The idea that musical theatre casts can resemble a *“temporary family”* (Francesca) became apparent during interviews. At first glance, describing casts and entire productions as a family implies a supportive, community feel, which is certainly present to some degree. However, the more challenging attributes associated with family life, particularly those between siblings, such as competitiveness and rivalry, appear equally present. Numerous participants described the nature of casts as being supportive. For example, Andrew described the *“support structure”* from *“shared experience.”* Furthermore, Bailey commented that she often sees *“a real sense of belonging in a show”* and feelings of genuine friendships. The shared experience brings performers together, naturally facilitating a supportive environment. These relationships are only strengthened by the increased intensity of touring productions, as experts highlighted the difficulties performers can face in maintaining contact with their real families and friends when on tour. For example, Elliot described how touring is *“not conducive to family life [pause] to any kind of normal life.”* As a result, performers seem to rely more on their cast as a

“temporary family.” This aligns closely with research by Burkhart (2017), who, in a study of actors, found close relationships between castmates to be crucial to health and well-being, which was further heightened on tour due to casts spending extensive work and leisure time together. As relationships with cast members can be crucial to maintaining well-being, this could intensify previously discussed pressures to *“fit in”* with a production.

Another aspect of family that industry experts discussed was an unhealthy sense of hierarchy within productions. For example, George described the power dynamic between the production team and performers, stating, *“psychologically, you have to whip them [performers].”* This metaphor implies that some creatives act calculatedly to get performers to do as they wish, for the sake of the show. Furthermore, it highlights how performers’ relationships with creatives could be pivotal to their experiences. This sense of control is echoed by Francesca, who noted that *“certain directors working in the industry come from a place of ‘do as I say.’”* This power imbalance evokes connotations of a strict parent-child relationship, whereby the role of the production team in some way involves disciplining performers, telling them what to do and how to behave.

Both examples imply that performers and creatives assume roles related to Berne’s (1975) transactional analysis theory: performers as the Child and production teams as the Critical Parent. The relationship also speaks to the criticised master-apprentice model in acting that fuels a power imbalance between teacher and student (Prior, 2012). This structure might seem familiar to managers and employees in other lines of work, but an extreme power imbalance is concerning in musical theatre, given that human resources (HR), policy and procedures do not offer the same support and protection to performers (Society of London Theatre, 2018). The concept of performers being childlike was implied further by Daphne when she asked rhetorical questions, *“do we fight like brothers and sisters and stuff like that? Make up the same?”* and again by Francesca who questioned *“You know, families aren’t perfect [...] the actors are like siblings, and there is a connectivity, but also a competitiveness that exists within siblings, right? By their very nature.”* These two examples highlight a childlike sibling

rivalry between performers, perhaps behaviour that demands discipline from a parent-like figure. One questions whether creatives taking on a Critical Parent role could further fuel the childlike sibling behaviour described by experts. This begins to highlight the issues of power imbalance within the industry and how hierarchical structures might affect performers' experiences.

Although experts noted the competitive nature of the industry generally, numerous participants suggested that performers' competitiveness and feeling of imposter syndrome are heightened most once in a production. For example, Francesca stated,

"I don't think it [competitiveness] disappears when you get into the frame, it's probably magnified. Because I've got the part, brilliant I've proved that, but am I good enough for the part?"

Francesca noted feelings of self-doubt, which could be further fuelled by competition that performers may have with their peers, even if it is a childlike sibling rivalry. Previously, Fenton (2022) highlighted the prevalence of imposter syndrome in musical theatre performers and called for greater awareness of the phenomenon in musical theatre curricula. Research has predominantly explored competitiveness within the industry in the context of auditions and the pressure on performers to find work rather than when in productions (Seton, 2007; Walker & Commander, 2017). Consequently, performers' experiences of competition and imposter syndrome during contracts are further explored in Phase Two.

Experts also questioned the extent to which the "temporary family" found within a production might be somewhat of a façade. For example, Andrew implied this when they stated:

"The idea of a family, of a supporting family, tends to be what, what, I see a lot. I mean, mind you, I'm just thinking unless you really talk to someone, you don't really know because you see that a lot, "my family, my cast" on social media when people share things. I wonder what the reality behind it is?"

Perhaps, for some performers, *“temporary family”* is a superficial concept maintained through social media profiles, mirroring the kind of cast relationships they see from others or simply seek for themselves. The reasons for this could lie in a desire for performers to seem *“agreeable”* and uphold a positive *“reputation”* in what is a small industry (George). Perhaps the social media façade is a performer's attempt to convince others that their cast relationships are maintained throughout a production. Interviews with performers in the next stage of the project sought to shed light on whether this façade exists.

Overall, *“You know, families aren't perfect,”* a quote from well-being practitioner Francesca, perhaps encapsulates the theme of *“temporary family”* most succinctly. On the one hand, a support system can exist within casts. Conversely, some performers may experience a more competitive and hierarchical structure within a temporary family. Findings have aligned with literature suggesting the intensity of touring can foster closer relationships within casts than static productions. Additionally, findings showed that relationships between performers and production teams can be unbalanced, with production teams exerting discipline and control over performers reminiscent of parent-child relationships. Furthermore, this was not the only family dynamic present, as experts described intra-performer relationships as sibling-like. Phase Two of this project allowed performers to reveal their experiences, shedding light on the cultures they have experienced in productions.

3.5.2 Perceptions within casts

Experts and literature align in describing the roles within musical theatre productions as clearly defined, featuring leads, ensemble, swing, understudy, backstage and members of the production and creative teams (Elster, 2023). Experts suggested that a hierarchy that has historically existed within productions is likely due to this defined separation of roles, with production teams at the top and leads above ensemble and swing/understudy roles. Kennedy perceived the role of an understudy as follows:

“Understudies have always been seen as someone ‘oh you're not quite good

enough, so you just be the understudy.’ Yeah, and also, same with the covers, understudies and swings, ‘you’re not quite good enough’ for you know, to be ‘the part,’ so you’ll just be the understudy. But even though I must say, there is a certain truth to that element.”

Kennedy speaks to a common assumption echoed in literature and throughout media today: those who fall outside the leading/principal roles are not good enough to be in leading roles onstage every night (Smith & Eyer, 2015). However, this assumption is largely false as being an understudy or swing requires a complex and entirely separate level of expertise in managing multiple tracks and performing under pressure at the last minute (Elster, 2023). The mindset that swings are “*not quite good enough*” fuels a harmful hierarchical culture within productions and could impact the self-esteem of performers (Elster, 2023).

In a positive shift, largely post-COVID-19, experts explained how, to some degree, these perceptions are beginning to change. Francesca explained:

“The power used to be quite low on the swing actors. They didn’t necessarily get the same level of rehearsal time. I’ve worked on some productions more recently where the swing actor is seen as important as the other actors because Covid can stop a show, a swing actor, can save a show, right? So, and I think that power dynamic is shifting a little bit in terms of what it means to be in certain roles.”

Awareness of the complexity and demands of the swing role are being noticed within the industry. Crucially, those in positions of power, such as producers, are perhaps more aware than ever of the value of swings to keep shows open. This change in perception is mirrored in literature by Elster (2023), who notes that previously being a swing was seen as somewhat of a thankless task, but COVID-19 highlighted the vital importance of swings to productions. Whether this shift remains and performers feel there has been a significant change in attitude towards swings and understudies is explored in Phase Two.

Another significant shift has been in terms of diversity in recent years, largely as a result of movements including Black Lives Matter. Experts emphasised an increase in dialogue surrounding the representation of marginalised communities onstage. For example, Kennedy described how casting has shifted, producers are *“really focusing on keeping it as truthful and as faithful to the source material, to avoid any conflict.”* When asked to expand, Kennedy explained that the *“conflict”* he was referencing was adverse reactions from performers and the wider musical theatre audience to casting decisions. Kennedy’s experience could suggest that creatives are not increasing diversity because representation for so many performers is long overdue, but rather simply as a performative act to *“avoid conflict.”* This speaks to performative diversity, which does nothing in tackling inequities and is merely to appease audiences (Saha, 2024).

Discussions of representation have triggered some to feel performers from marginalised communities are at an *“advantage because the industry is so willing to open up to global majority performers”* (Andrew). Moreover, George stated, *“ethnic performers have an easier time because often producers feel obliged to have an ethnic content in their cast.”* It is controversial to claim that Global Majority performers have an *“easier time,”* and it is important to address the language George uses, which is uncomfortable. However, the positive discrimination George has witnessed towards Global Majority performers is vital in discussions of representation, as it points to performative diversity. This kind of approach fails to recognise the value that representation and diversity bring to stories and audiences alike on the West End stage and does not seek to challenge inequities, but is in the interest of a production’s public appearance. George touched upon the adjustment that some white performers have had to navigate. Hannah noted:

“People are now seeing people of colour for roles that wouldn’t have been considered before for that particular role. And so then suddenly the pool’s got bigger, which I think is brilliant but, I think it probably is hard to swallow when you’ve been just used to walking into getting those parts.”

Hannah spoke of a resentment that some white performers may feel against recent shifts in diversity within musical theatre. The increase in the representation of Global Majority performers that Hannah has witnessed is the long-overdue first step in making the industry more equitable. Global Majority performers can infuse their experiences into the characters they play, challenging racist tropes and *“transform the character in a way that changes the audience’s perceptions”* (Davis, 2024, p. 168). Saha (2024) criticises current diversity initiatives as they do not address inequities sufficiently. Instead, greater representation with actors is simply the beginning. Despite initiatives across the creative industries, there has been little meaningful change, and inequities remain (Malik & Shankley, 2020). Literature calls for increased funding to cultural producers such as writers and producers from marginalised communities and placing greater value on audience outreach initiatives. Ultimately, moving to a place where Global Majority creatives can write about their experiences with the same freedom and agency that their white counterparts are afforded (Saha, 2024).

Experts spoke of how Global Majority and other marginalised performers may experience feeling cast as a tick-box exercise. The phrase *“tick-box”* was used by four participants, who explained the difficulty performers and creatives in the industry can experience when they feel, or others perceive, that they were only employed based on their identity. For example, Kennedy stated:

“Even though at the beginning, you feel like they are the right person for the job but if they don’t deliver, as well as they should, people naturally assume it’s because of those reasons [pause] is it because they are ticking a box?”

Kennedy described being hired for a job undermined by notions of *tick-box* exercises. This assumption perhaps stems from the prevalence of performative diverse casting. Moreover, Leo expressed concern that this approach of tick boxing could lead to performers being confined to certain shows. He stated:

“While there is a push for diversity and representation, there is a danger that those performers that are now being sort of championed and platformed are

only being platforms for shows and stories that just require these people.

These certain protected characteristics as you say, and not being considered for anything else. That leads to that danger of being tick-boxed and put into a box where they are only considered for - inverted commas – ‘the Asian shows’ or ‘the Black shows.’”

This demonstrates how tick-box representation does not lead to real positive change in the industry today and instead continues to *other* performers from marginalised communities (Mobley, 2014). Chua and Singh (2022) echo this when they describe the current culture of a select few “*powerhouse shows*” telling stories of marginalised communities, yet a broad lack of representation of marginalised communities persists.

Andrew provides further insights into this topic from the perspective of musical theatre training. He explained:

“There’s an expectation that sometimes they [students] feel. For example, if I’m a young black woman, I’ll be expected to sing gospel very well. I’ll be expected to audition for Dreamgirls or Tina the musical. And I’ll be expected to sing, in a certain way. So if I’m a young black student, and I sing lyrically better than I belt. I might feel ‘Oh shit is there, is there room for me in the industry if I don’t [pause] conform to the expectation?’”

Andrew highlights the expectations put on Black female performers to conform and suit their vocal style to what are considered “*Black shows.*” He continued:

“It’s almost a rite of passage for our black students. Again, black women students to sing, ‘I’m here’ from The Colour Purple as they train. At some point. Many of them do that. I’m not sure there’s an equivalent for the white soprano or the white baritone.”

Andrew presents the enormously restrictive stereotypes placed onto Black performers, with expectations that they should sing from a restricted repertoire. These expectations put on Black performers must be challenged by training institutions through an “*anti-racist strategy*”

(Shakespeare's Globe, n.d., para. 1). One that should begin with an urgent shift to a greater presence of works by Black writers within the curriculum (Daly, 2025). These findings contribute to understanding inequities in musical theatre by uncovering a significant issue of default whiteness, in which performers who lie outside this *norm* are othered and forced into stereotyped roles (Warren, 2025). Black students' white counterparts do not have to navigate restrictions and have free rein to choose the styles they perform. Phase Two of this project explored how these stereotyped assumptions and inequities impact the well-being of Global Majority performers.

Experts noted that although there is growing diversity within the industry, performers still experience a lack of true inclusion. Daphne encapsulated this when she stated:

“Even though there is diversity in the room, there's not always inclusion in the room because [of] the people that are in charge, all of the decision-makers, all the people offstage, a lot of the time, a lot of people on the [pause] audition panel. You know, the amount of times that I've heard stories of Black performers entering into an audition for a predominantly Black show with an all-white auditioning panel.”

Daphne highlights a lack of diversity in the “*decision-makers*” roles in productions. This means the stories told onstage are filtered through a white perspective, even if the story is about the experiences of marginalised communities. This risks perpetuating stereotypes, something well-documented in literature (Golemba, 2021; Kuric Kardelis, 2023; Yates, 2020). Moreover, a lack of diversity offstage raises concerns about the culture backstage and whether all performers are wholly catered for in hair and makeup.

Although there is a perception of progress, the industry has a long way to go regarding representation and addressing inequities. For example, Company Manager Neil described his attempts to ensure all performers feel supported, but how, in practice, this has been challenging. He explained,

“We've had really positive experiences with people saying to me they feel

really heard and seen and understood [...] particularly in terms of heritage and hair. And the way that we treat, we treat different hairstyles and different backgrounds and everything, but it's been a learning curve and there have been moments when that hasn't gone well [...] Whether it's an organisation, like a regional rep who are funded or whether it's a commercial producer, [they have] a responsibility to kind of educate themselves, really about, about race, about gender, about diversity. Because we live in the world that is increasingly [pause] well not increasingly because it's always been so, but I think is, we live, quite rightly, in an industry now there is more diverse than it's ever been and you want to reflect [pause] create a space that everyone that's [pause] so I feel like my job is, to try and create space, where everyone feels as equal as possible, and for everyone to do their good [pause] their best work."

Neil highlights an awareness of the responsibility that producers must take in educating themselves about equality, diversity and inclusion, and how an equitable space directly impacts whether performers are able to do *"their best work."* In a positive sense, Neil spoke of performers feeling heard and understood regarding backstage hair treatment, but admits there have been times *"where it hasn't gone well."* Neil refrained from detailing these experiences, but this is unsurprising given that research has highlighted high frequencies of discrimination backstage (Bectu, 2025). This highlights the beginnings of a positive shift towards a more equitable and inclusive industry, yet also shows there is still a long way to go and how performers with protected characteristics continue to face additional avoidable barriers.

These examples further prove that performers' experiences can vary drastically between productions. As Daphne stated, *"there's no [pause] universal approach. There are some shows that are doing amazing things, and some that aren't."* While some producers are making conscious efforts to increase diversity in storytelling, casting and backstage, this is not *"universal,"* and some production teams are unaware of the need for diversity. Many inequities continue to persist across the industry. For example, there remains a distinct lack of roles for

disabled performers and a lack of understanding for performers who are parents (Kochensparger, 2019). More awareness and action are needed to facilitate industry-wide change and ensure greater diversity and inclusion. As performers enter an audition room, it is unpredictable whether the production team will accommodate their needs or foster an inclusive environment. This could undoubtedly contribute to anxiety when performers with protected characteristics enter a new production, thus the experiences of performers with protected characteristics is a key area of focus in Phase Two (see Chapter 4.4).

In conclusion, theme 4 highlights numerous cultural shifts within the musical theatre industry. The first significant shift highlighted by experts is the increase in respect towards swing and understudy performers. The second is greater conversation and awareness surrounding the representation of marginalised communities and diversity onstage. This is evident from experts' speaking of greater diversity in casting in lead roles and awareness backstage. While representation might be increasing, some in the industry resent performers with protected characteristics, and there is a cycle of tick-box casting and performative diversity. This only further worsens inequities within musical theatre. Performers may feel cast as a tick-box exercise and not based on their abilities, which could hugely impact emotional well-being. There remains a default whiteness and significant presence of stereotypes, which must be addressed if the industry is to move forward. Although progress has been made, the industry still has a long way to go in ensuring all productions offer an inclusive environment for all performers.

3.6 Theme 5: Support and survival

Theme 5 outlines the current prominent narratives and stigmas in the musical theatre industry, as well as discussions of work-life balance and well-being support available to performers.

3.6.1 “The show must go on” and industry stigmas

Although hugely challenging, the multiple crises in recent years, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have afforded opportunities for reflection and facilitated more open conversations surrounding mental and physical well-being (Tourniaire, 2023). Experts spoke of how, during this time of instability, creatives and performers alike have had the opportunity to question their roles and needs within the industry. Bailey explained, “COVID, however terrible it was [...] gave a window of opportunity to address the issue of mental health in the industry.” This hints at a change in perspective surrounding mental health within musical theatre, which is further echoed by Neil: “You know that horrid old [phrase] ‘the show must go on’. Well, I don’t think everyone believes that in the same way that they did.” Neil highlighted a positive shift from the traditional “the show must go on” philosophy. This signifies a growing awareness of performer well-being and an understanding of the pressing issue of burnout. To lead a sustainable career in musical theatre, performers must be conscious of their emotional and physical limits and acknowledge when they cannot perform sustainably (Fenton, 2022). This highlights the opportunity for reflection afforded in recent years, which has led to an increased awareness of the importance of performer well-being.

Despite these positive shifts, some experts described the stigma surrounding well-being remaining within the industry and the desire for further change. For example, Francesca described how as “well-being [support] filter[s] in, there needs to be an awareness.” Francesca implied that, alongside growing well-being support, attitudes need to shift to create long-lasting change. In fact, some interviewees perpetuated the stigma and expressed support for a “survival of the fittest” narrative and demonstrated a lack of compassion towards performers’ mental health. This is exemplified by Elliot when he stated:

“No, if you can’t do it and if you can’t stand the heat and you have to get out, it’s [...] as simple as that [...] Survival of the fittest, goodbye [...] Don’t do it if you can’t hack it, don’t do it. Plenty of other people queuing up, plenty of out of work people desperate to do what you’re doing. So don’t moan and get on

with it.”

These statements highlight persistent stigmas within the industry that coincide with the traditional “*the show must go on*” mantra (Hemley, 2022). Encouraging performers not to “*moan and get on with it*” could deter performers from asking for help and support when they need it. This is hugely concerning in this population, given the high prevalence of anxiety, work-related stress and self-doubt among performers (Maxwell et al., 2015; Maxwell et al., 2018). These examples highlight the variation in attitude to well-being and the presence of narratives like “*survival of the fittest*” within the industry.

Experts described financial pressures on productions contributing to the persisting “*the show must go on*” philosophy. Kennedy explained: “*The repercussions of cancelling the show, it means financially [pause] they’re [producer] worse off so therefore, they’d much rather [pause] push someone to go onstage and keep the show open [...] rather than cancelling the show altogether.*” This attitude of “*pushing through*” is extremely concerning, as continuing to perform while suffering from illness or injury can have lasting consequences to performers well-being (Rosenberg, 2022; Vassallo et al., 2019). To lead a sustainable career, performers must closely balance their emotional and physical well-being with the demands of eight shows a week. They must be aware of their vocal dose, injuries, and mental and physical health and take sufficient breaks and rest to maintain their well-being (Gaskill & Hetzel, 2017). Mantras like “*the show must go on*” prioritise the production over performers' well-being, which calls for further exploration into how performers navigate this and how mantras can be reframed.

Intense scheduling and tight contract restrictions largely stem from financial pressures on productions. For example, Leo argued that the reason for intense scheduling is “*always financial.*” This restricted schedule is also mirrored in performer contracts. Daphne explained the challenges associated with musical theatre contracts: “*It's extremely difficult to get non-availability days [pause] you will not be granted any days in which you can go to weddings or major life events, and I think that has a huge contribution to work-life [balance].*” These constraints impact the work-life balance and well-being of performers and perpetuate “*the*

show must go on” philosophy (Flowers, 2023; Morgan, 2022). How performers navigate these restrictions and to what extent they experience pressure to subscribe to “*the show must go on*” mantra is explored in Phase Two.

Maintaining a healthy work-life balance can be an even greater challenge for performers in touring productions. Kennedy explained, “*Touring, you probably have no life apart from like you have a work-life balance with the people within your workplace.*” This echoes previously discussed notions that performers are often forced to rely on cast mates for support when away from their usual network of family and friends (Bradley, 2019). Kennedy could also be referring to a lack of time off during tours. Performers travel to venues during their time off, further impeding their work-life balance (Roll & Goffi-Fynn, 2021). This is all in conjunction with the tiredness and fatigue associated with the physical demands of performance (Roll & Goffi-Fynn, 2021). Performers on tour must also contend with stigmas surrounding accommodation. For example, numerous experts mentioned the stigma surrounding “*digs*” and the expectation to be “*grateful*” and not complain despite conditions (Mae, Jessie). Accommodation on tour is often organised on a limited budget, and so unsurprisingly, experts noted a “*crisis*” of adequate “*digs*” (Daphne). This reinforces that musical theatre is a business at its core. Producers should ultimately prioritise performers' well-being over any profits, as without the performers, there is no show. It is clear that performers encounter additional stigmas and pressures on tour, which can impact work-life balance. Phase Two explored in more detail precisely how performers feel regarding touring productions.

3.6.2 Well-being support

The prevalence of stigmas within the industry continues in discussions of current well-being support. Experts all described to some level the ease and prevalence of physical well-being support within the industry today. For example, Daphne said because of the “*physical nature*

of musical theatre [...] physio is 99% always paid for by the company.” If a show is deemed to have a “physical nature,” support is almost a guarantee for performers to maintain their physical well-being. Psychological support, however, is far from a guarantee. George said, performers *“can go and book a physio appointment in the interval[...] Emotional support is hard to get [...] it's always [...] just slightly as a last resort.”* This indicates a clear divide in how physical and emotional well-being is treated within the industry. Physical support is readily available, yet emotional support is provided as a *“last resort.”* Seife (2022) has previously noted a discrepancy in the US, with greater demands for physical well-being support than psychological support. This reinforces previously discussed stigmas surrounding mental health and highlights the changes in perspective needed within the industry. It also links to financial pressures that productions are under, as experts alluded to financing psychological support as an *“extra”* and thus not a priority. This is particularly concerning given the frequency of difficult themes and trauma in productions today, which are known to be emotionally exhausting (Sherman et al., 2021; Wyver, 2023).

Thanks to some recent shifts in conversation, there is an increasing availability of psychological well-being support within the industry. Experts explained the variety of formal roles in some productions that support performers' emotional well-being, including intimacy coordinators and on-site counsellors offering one-on-one sessions (Andrew, Daphne and Francesca). The role of the intimacy coordinator in ensuring performers' well-being is multifaceted, from knowledge of consent to boundary setting and diversity and inclusion within the industry (Lashmar, 2023). Daphne further detailed the wide spectrum of support available, from workshops on mental health awareness at annual cast changes to monthly check-ins.

Experts emphasised, however, that it is the choice of producers as to which support is available to performers. Francesca explained how structuring the well-being support for a production is a

“dialogue with the companies about what does this project need? What does this show need? We'd always want to work with the director, the writer, the

producers to create a package that is going to be helpful for that show. And [pause] the conversations are happening more now, not everywhere. [...] I'm curious about where we become a sticking plaster rather than something that's really becoming part of the industry"

The kind of support that performers require can vary between productions, and thus conversations are needed between well-being organisations and the productions. This support must be proactive rather than a "*sticking plaster*" to fix issues in the industry temporarily. Moreover, the lack of an industry standard is echoed again, with well-being conversations happening more often but crucially not in all productions. Inviting outside support into productions can be hugely beneficial, as research highlights the positive impacts of roles such as the intimacy coordinator, counsellors, and behaviour consultants (Chen & Jagtiani, 2021; Fenton, 2022; Sherman et al., 2021). Support such as this is highly valuable not only to shows deemed to have *difficult themes* but to all productions. Providing casts with greater psychological well-being support helps to improve performer well-being in the short term and to sustain their ability to perform long term, thereby, reducing the likelihood of time off and ensuring the "*show can go on*" without compromising a performer's health.

The role of mental health first-aider is highly valuable to casts, as it can be embedded within productions. The position can be useful in providing support and signposting to performers. Daphne explained that senior members of all departments in some productions are encouraged to undertake training and take on the role of Mental Health First Aider, acting as a trained first point of contact for performers in support. This not only enables performers to have easier access to signposting and support, but the mere presence of the role within a production raises awareness of the importance of mental health. Providing training to those already within productions and who have regular contact with performers is key. This is because they are likely already familiar to performers, so the process simply enhances a pre-existing support structure. For example, experts continuously associated the role of company manager with mental health support, but as Mae noted, "*they're highly experienced, but they're*

not mental health professionals.” Training senior members of departments, like company managers, is crucial in ensuring support is as accessible as possible to performers.

That being said, experts emphasised the vital role of informal support in maintaining well-being, from cast mates to family and friends. For example, experienced performer Charlie said, *“it is going to just be, you know, family and friends basically, I think [pause] who are going to support people.”* Research has echoed the importance of family and friends in terms of social support (Burkhart, 2017). However, performers may experience difficulties relying solely on informal structures like family and friends when in touring productions. This is because of the *“isolation”* many performers experience away from their families on tour (Bradley, 2019, p. 208). Overall, the importance of both formal and informal support structures in performers’ maintaining their emotional and physical well-being is evident. Phase Two investigated further which forms of support are most useful to performers and areas that need to be expanded upon.

Overall, theme 5 has shown that despite some positive conversation shifts, numerous stigmas persist within the musical theatre industry. Financial pressures fuel narratives such as *“the show must go on.”* This perpetuates harmful mindsets in performers that they must perform even to the detriment of their health. Additionally, attitudes differ towards physical and psychological injuries, and so support remains difficult to obtain for mental health. However, there has been some progress. Largely since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing movement of change within the industry. There is greater awareness of mental health, well-being, and work-life balance in both the industry and society. However, it is the decision of producers what level of support is put in place for a production. Consequently, more awareness is needed to ensure production teams know what support is available, why it is beneficial and how to put it in place for performers. More industry-wide support strategies would help make well-being support as accessible as possible.

3.7 Conclusions of Phase One

In conclusion, Phase One has provided an overview of the musical theatre industry and uncovered key areas that are further explored in Phase Two. Five themes detail experts' views on today's industry and the issues impacting performers' well-being. Findings contribute to the musical theatre performance career framework of this study and recommendations, which are combined with findings from Phase Two.

Theme 1 outlined the challenges experts associated with early career performers. Findings revealed some of the most significant challenges are being emotionally and physically prepared to enter the industry, and how some graduates are not sufficiently prepared for the realities of eight shows a week. The role that training institutions and industry organisations can play in supporting performers during the early stage has become clear. Career calling is crucial to why performers pursue their careers, which is further explored in Phase Two.

Key findings from theme 2 include the prevalence of ageism within the industry. Experts noted the challenge of navigating casting brackets, particularly given the lack of representation for older performers. This theme contributes to the understanding of financial pressures in the musical theatre industry and how survival jobs can impact identity. During Phase Two of this project, performers shed light on their experiences of financial pressures and how they impact work-life balance.

Theme 3 uncovered the repetitive nature of musical theatre. Experts highlighted the psychologically demanding nature of auditions as performers aim to be what a casting panel wants to see. Experts also emphasised the challenge performers face in knowing their physical limits. Training institutions and production teams alike could encourage performers to develop a mindset that prioritises well-being, highlighting the value of training, warm-up and cool-downs to help prevent injury. Education and awareness of vocal dose are vital for performers to lead sustainable careers. Phase Two of the project further explored how

performers cope with the demanding long hours of rehearsals and performances. It also investigated how performers manage their well-being, particularly when faced with performing difficult themes linked to their own experiences or identity.

Significant findings from theme 4 include the “*temporary family*” metaphor that experts consistently used to describe casts and production teams. It became clear that in some productions, creatives assume the role of parental figures and performers' children. This could lead to unbalanced relationships where performers lack agency. Thus, productions should ensure appropriate support systems are in place when a cast enters a show, particularly given the widespread lack of HR in the industry. Experts also highlighted recent shifts in casting for greater representation and diversity in productions. Although there have been some positive shifts, resentment and outdated attitudes remain, as well as a tendency for performative diversity rather than initiatives that move towards substantial change. Phase Two explores how performers from marginalised backgrounds feel about recent conversations surrounding casting and what more could be done to wholly address inequities. A more inclusive industry would crucially move away from the sense of unpredictability that many performers encounter when they enter a new cast, unsure of how their castmates and production teams will treat them.

The most significant finding from theme 5 is the persistence of stigmas within the industry. Experts highlighted the prevalence of narratives such as the “*show must go on.*” Furthermore, a stark difference remains between how physical and psychological well-being is perceived and how injuries are treated. There is a long way to go, both on an industry and societal level, for mental health awareness and support. Crucially, there have been some positive shifts within the industry. These have included more productions utilising the role of mental health first-aiders, intimacy coordinators and counsellors. Hopefully, with more open conversations surrounding well-being, performers could feel more confident seeking support when needed. Phase Two investigated what support performers have been offered and which they value, including formal and informal support structures and areas that could be improved.

Phase One was a preliminary investigation into today's musical theatre industry and the key factors impacting performers' well-being. The role of experts was key to understanding the demands of the industry and the presence of mantras like "*the show must go on*" but demonstrated the need for further investigation with the performers themselves, who would offer a clearer perspective on the impacts of these demands and mantras.

Chapter 4: Phase Two

4.1 Introduction

This chapter details Phase Two of the project. The discussion of findings combines the quantitative survey data with the qualitative survey responses and semi-structured interviews. After the presentation of quantitative results to provide the context for the more detailed analysis, six themes derived from reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative data are discussed:

1. The double-edged sword of career calling
2. The changing culture within productions
3. The demanding nature of musical theatre
4. The show must not always go on
5. Communication and clearer support pathways
6. Challenges to work-life balance

Figure 4: Data visualisation of the themes of Phase Two



Each theme can be understood by one central concept and unites several sub-themes. Performers expanded upon much of what experts had alluded to in Phase One with added insights from first-hand experience. Following the presentation of the thematic analysis, initial conclusions from this chapter are made. The findings are contextualised within current research and contribute to the musical theatre performance career framework of this study.

4.2 Quantitative data analysis

There were 105 survey responses, of which 49 answered the additional qualitative question in the survey. Sociodemographic data was detailed in the methods chapter (see Chapter 2.5). Further specific data on performers' careers is presented in Table 5. There was an even split of performers currently in contract (53.33%) and out of contract (46.67%). In terms of career identity, the three most common labels were *Triple Threat* (33.33%), *Performer* (26.67%) and *Actor* (20.95%). Of those not in contract, 36.73% were primarily working in the creative sector

but outside the musical theatre industry. The most common contract location was 46.67% the West End (In Town).

Table 5: Career data of survey respondents (n= 105)

	Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Currently in contract	Yes	56	53.33
	No	49	46.67
	Creative work outside the industry (i.e. teaching, performing)	18	36.73
	Creative work within the industry (i.e. performing outside musical theatre)	10	9.52
	Non creative work outside the industry (i.e. bar work)	11	10.48
	Non creative work within the industry (i.e. front of house)	4	3.81
	Other	6	5.71
Career identity	Triple threat	35	33.33
	Performer	28	26.67
	Actor	22	20.95
	Singer	12	11.43
	Dancer	2	1.90
	Actor and singer*	1	.95
	Actor/ singer/ mover*	1	.95
	Actor/ director/ writer*	1	.95
	Artist	1	.95
	Creative*	1	.95

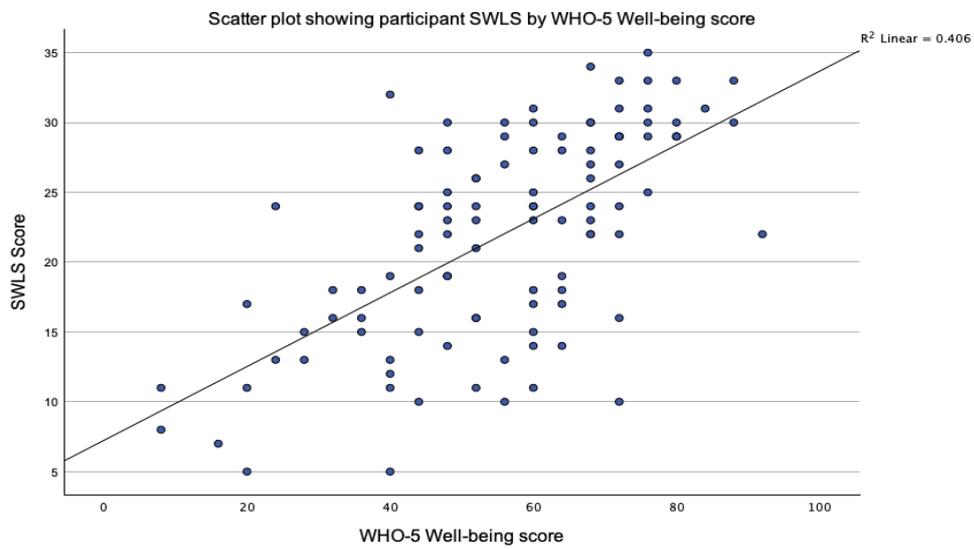
	Musician*	1	.95
Location	In Town (West End or off West End)	49	46.67
	Touring	23	21.90
	Static Regional	17	16.2
	Cruise Ship	10	9.52
	Pantomime	6	5.71
Total		105	

Note. * Indicates participant's own suggestion

4.2.1 Results from well-being measures

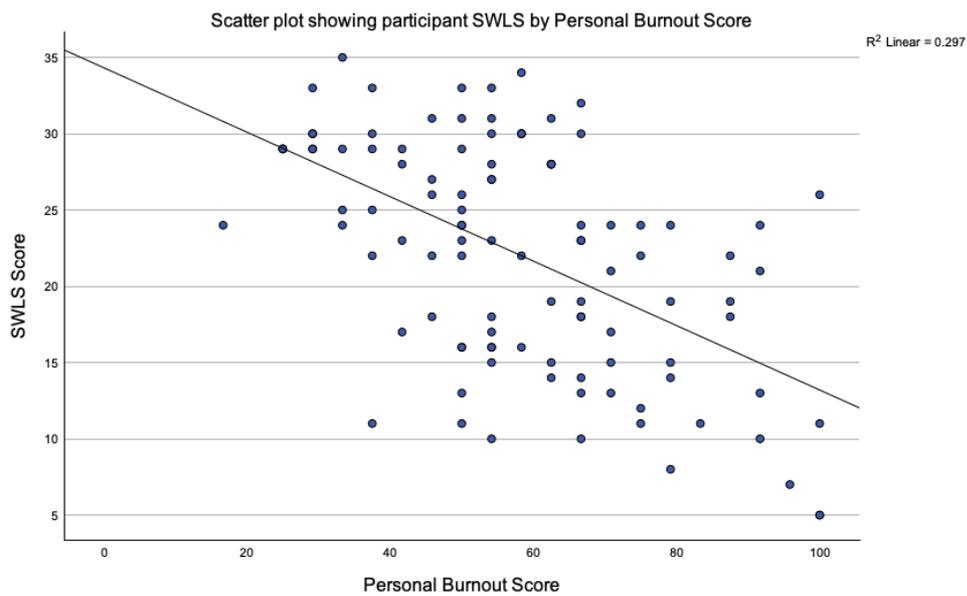
This study used three measures to gain insights into performers' well-being: WHO-5 Well-being Index (WHO-5; Topp et al., 2015), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) and the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI; Kristensen et al., 2005). A series of Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationships between each scale. There was a significant positive correlation between SWLS and WHO-5 Well-being score, ($r(103) = .64, p < .001$).

Figure 5: Scatter plot showing participant SWLS by WHO-5 Well-being Score



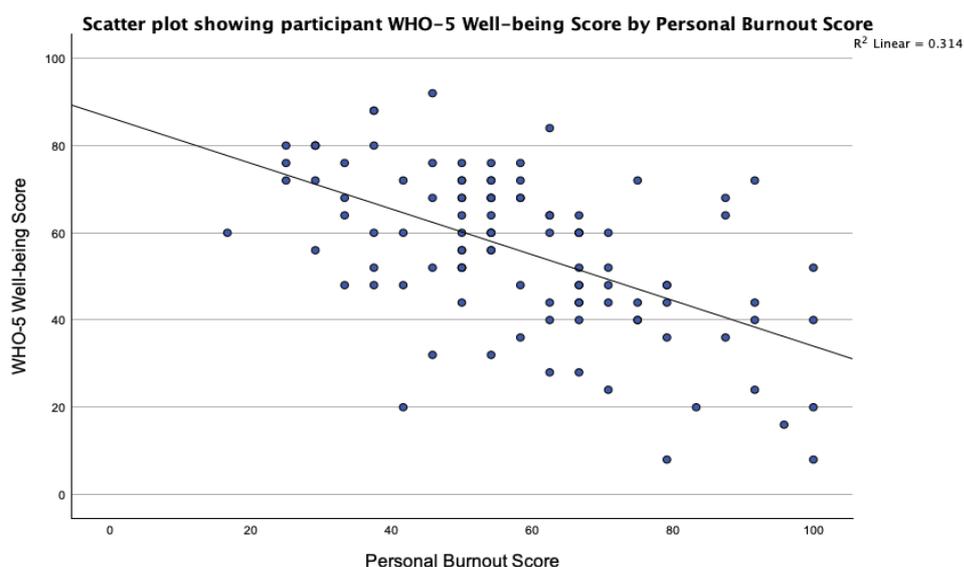
There was a significant negative correlation between SWLS and personal burnout score ($r(103) = -.56, p < .001$).

Figure 6: Scatter plot showing participant SWLS by Personal Burnout Score



There was a significant negative correlation between WHO-5 Well-being score and personal burnout score ($r(103) = -.56, p < .001$).

Figure 7: Scatter plot showing participant WHO-5 Well-being Score by Personal Burnout Score



The results of the Pearson correlation coefficients were expected from the data, as the three scores all test well-being from different angles: the WHO-5 scale measures subjective psychological well-being, SWLS considers a specific facet of subjective well-being- general life satisfaction, and the CBI measures level of emotional and physical exhaustion key factors that impact well-being. The correlations show that as burnout increases, subjective well-being decreases (see Figures 5-7).

The descriptive statistics for each well-being score can be compared to existing data investigating other groups. The mean WHO-5 well-being score was 55.85 (SD= 17.95); this is comparable to other populations in existing literature, which found similar scores (M= 52.74, SD= 20.27, Alessandri et al., 2020; M= 56.44, SD= 16.85; Rose et al., 2024). The mean SWLS score for performers was 22.00 (SD = 7.45), which is slightly lower than other populations considered in research, ranging from 23.5 to 26.18 (Arrindell et al., 1999; Diener et al., 1985;

Hawi & Rupert, 2016). The mean personal burnout score was 58.34 (SD= 19.21) and the mean work burnout score was 51.97 (SD= 18.00). This was higher than most research featuring similar populations, for example Kristensen et al. (2005) found scores of personal burnout M= 35.9 (SD= 16.5) and work burnout M= 33.0 (SD= 17.7) in a sample of human service sector workers and Milfont et al. (2008) measured teachers experience of burnout; personal burnout M= 43.0 (SD= 17.7) and work burnout M=41.5 (SD= 18.3). A threshold of 50 is suggested to identify a group with high burnout; in the present study, 77 out of 105 participants scored over the threshold (73%) (Kristensen, 2019). These results signal a pressing issue of burnout, with almost three-quarters of performers in the present study currently experiencing high burnout.

Gender

A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to test if there were any statistically significant differences between males ($n = 54$) and females ($n = 50$) for the three well-being scores (WHO-5, SWLS, CBI). The results showed that, assuming equal variances, there was no significant difference in WHO-5, SWLS, or personal burnout scores between males and females, suggesting that gender does not significantly impact scores (see Table 6). Despite this, it is worth noting that females had a slightly higher mean level of personal burnout score. One participant identified as non-binary, so was omitted from the analysis using gender as a two-group variable.

Table 6: Differences between males and females on three different well-being measure scores

Well-being scores	Male		Female		df	t	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
WHO-5	56.22	18.66	55.52	17.51	102	.198	.844	.039
SWLS	21.93	7.422	22.00	7.60	102	-.050	.960	-.010

Burnout	56.17	18.31	60.92	20.13	102	-1.258	.211	-.247
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Contract status

A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted to test if there were any statistically significant differences between performers who were in a contract ($n = 49$) and those who were out of contract ($n = 56$) for the three well-being scores (WHO-5, SWLS, CBI).

The results showed that, assuming equal variances, there was no significant difference in WHO-5, SWLS, or personal burnout scores between those in contract and those out of contract, suggesting that contract status does not impact well-being scores (see Table 7).

Table 7: Differences between in contract versus out of contract on three different well-being measure scores

Well-being scores	In contract		Out of contract		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
WHO-5	55.43	16.57	56.21	19.21	103	-.223	.824	-.044
SWLS	21.31	7.55	22.60	7.37	103	-.892	.374	-.175
Burnout	56.29	19.66	60.12	18.80	103	-1.02	.311	-.199

Years performing

A series of Pearson correlations were conducted to test if there were any statistically significant relationships between the number of years performing and the three well-being scores (WHO-5, SWLS, CBI). Results showed the number of years performing was not significantly correlated with WHO-5 ($r(103) = -.06, p = .536$); SWLS ($r(103) = .02, p = .850$); or personal burnout scores ($r(103) = -.08, p = .416$).

Age

A series of Pearson correlations were conducted to test if there were any statistically significant relationships between age and the three well-being scores (WHO-5, SWLS, CBI). Results showed age was not significantly correlated with WHO-5 ($r(103) = .02, p = .849$); SWLS ($r(103) = .12, p = .238$); or personal burnout scores ($r(103) = -.13, p = .184$).

Linear regression

Further statistical testing of a linear regression was conducted to model the relationship between age, years performing and well-being scores, however, no independent variables were found to be significant predictors.

4.2.2 Performer well-being outcomes

The high level of burnout and relatively low subjective well-being scores seen in the WHO-5 well-being index and SWLS measures identify a cost to well-being from performance. Some results were surprising, for instance, the lack of significant impact that contract status had on well-being scores. Given the intensity of “*eight shows a week*” musical theatre schedules, one may expect performers to experience more burnout during contracts than outside contracts (Wyver, 2023). The qualitative phase of data analysis provides more nuance and insight into possible reasons behind high burnout, regardless of contract status.

The mean SWLS score for performers was 22.00, *slightly satisfied*, which lies just below the expected range for economically developed countries (23 to 28) (Diener et al., 1985). This aligns with other data on performing artists, for instance, in a study of Australian actor well-being, Szabó et al. (2022) found similar ratings (Mean= 20.83, SD= 7.56). This begs the question: if performers in the present study were on average only *slightly satisfied* with their lives and yet almost three-quarters were currently experiencing high burnout, what are the reasons for their sustained commitment to the industry? Literature posits one possible

answer as career calling, which is explored in great detail in the qualitative phase of data collection.

4.3 Theme 1: The double-edged sword of career calling

4.3.1 Introduction to Theme 1

From the combined data collection of interviews and the survey, one of the most prominent themes performers touched on was career calling. Specifically, performers spoke of the double-edged sword or the dual negatives and positives of pursuing a career in musical theatre. Key to the phenomenon of career calling is how a performer's identity can become linked to their vocation (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023; Cinque et al., 2021; Seife, 2022). The concept is crucial to Fenton's (2022) musical theatre career capital framework. During Phase One, experts spoke of a thrill that performers strive for, which is a crucial reason for their commitment to the industry. This is expanded upon in Phase Two, with performers detailing their experiences of frustration and love simultaneously towards their careers. Performers' training experiences and preparedness for the industry relate closely to the nature of career calling, as they spoke of navigating challenging education practices, yet had a desire to pursue a musical theatre performance career.

4.3.2 Sub-theme A: The double-edged sword of pursuing a calling

Career calling can be understood as pursuing work that has great meaning to an individual (Dobrow, 2013). Dobrow (2004) argues that a vocational calling constitutes seven elements: passion, identity, urgency, longevity, engulf consciousness, sense of meaning and contributes to self-esteem. Findings support Dobrow's (2004) research, as all seven of these elements

were present within the data of Phase Two. All 15 performers exhibited career calling to some extent, many touching on a lifelong love of theatre and training confirming their aspirations to pursue musical theatre as a career. When describing their careers, participants often touched on several elements simultaneously. For example, Ethan and Gregory both described performing as something that was "*in my blood*," and Bella spoke of being "*born cartwheeling*." Performers also described falling in love with theatre, for instance, Dawn explained, "*I always loved it as a kid. I was always a singer and a dancer [...] turns out I was pretty good at singing and dancing and acting. So when it came time to pursue careers, I knew it needed to be [pause] I knew I wanted to perform.*" Movement and performance have been a part of these performers' lives for as long as they can remember, highlighting a strong sense of identity and longevity in their careers. Ethan and Gregory had been in the industry for over 20 and 30 years, respectively, and recalling performing as biologically within them shows that a musical theatre calling can continue throughout a career. Despite literature suggesting that maintaining a calling can be difficult to sustain, these findings highlight that it can be possible in musical theatre (Cardador & Caza, 2012).

Having graduated from undergraduate-level drama school training only a year ago, Bella was in the early stages of her career and had yet to make her professional musical theatre debut. However, she exhibited an unwavering sense of identity with the industry. Bella continued that she "*never really considered doing anything else.*" This is not an uncommon belief in the creative industries. In fact, McAuliffe (1977) argued that only performers who have an intense need to perform and cannot be convinced to pursue any other career will be successful. This older source highlights the long-standing notion of the perceived importance of having a musical theatre calling and focusing entirely on pursuing that dream. However, there are significant risks of exploitation embedded within this mindset, as those with the strongest callings are the most in danger of being exploited by management (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Like Bella, other performers also spoke of a tunnel vision attitude towards the industry. For example, Poppy described how

"It's crazy to see all of that written down and to see a reminder of how difficult this industry is. But to be honest, I can't do anything else in my life other than be a performer; it's all I want to do, which almost makes it more frustrating."

While admitting there are challenges to the industry, Poppy remains engulfed by a career in performance. Performers can experience an intertwining of personal and work identities blended so much that they only see themselves as performers. Poppy encapsulates the double-edged sword of career calling frustrations. Poppy's experience highlights how callings can positively and negatively impact individuals (Dobrow & Heller, 2015). Unsurprisingly, Poppy scored high on personal burnout (58.33 out of 100), residing in the high burnout group. Pursuing a calling can provide life meaning, but literature warns of the personal sacrifice and burnout of unhealthy pursuits (Cardador & Caza, 2012; Dobrow, 2013; Jansson et al., 2023). Poppy overlooks frustrations, burnout and, ultimately, *"how difficult this industry is"* because of a sense of calling.

More participants spoke of the meaning they garnered from musical theatre, particularly referencing performing itself. For example, Ethan expressed intense disappointment from missing a show: *"That's a night I'll never get back. It's a night of storytelling that I will never have, and a night of engagement with the audience I'll never get."* For Ethan, the connection with audiences is what makes performing so special, and he is transfixed by performing. This builds on findings from Phase One of the project, when experts spoke of a *"thrill"* associated with performance. For example, well-being practitioner Bailey said she had never *"met a performer who doesn't love what they're doing."* Ethan's WHO-5 well-being and SWLS scores were high and above the mean scores (WHO-5, 88 and SWLS, 30), further evidencing his love for his career.

Overall, many performers showed intense love for musical theatre and a strong calling to the career from a young age. There is, however, a double-edged sword, as unhealthy

pursuits of a calling can lead to personal sacrifice and strain on individuals and their relationships with others (Dobrow & Heller, 2015). The passion that performers have towards performance and connection with audiences is fundamental to performers and often why they overlook the demands of the industry. Career calling underpins much of Phase Two and is discussed later, particularly within Theme 6 (Chapter 4.8), making it a crucial part of the musical theatre performance career framework of this study.

4.3.3 Sub-theme B: Training experiences and preparedness for the industry

During interviews, participants were asked about their training experiences and whether they felt physically and emotionally prepared for the industry, which builds on findings from Phase One. Performers' training experiences varied significantly. The most common level of training performers had was undergraduate level (66.67% total), including university or drama school training. This is unsurprising given the popularity of musical theatre undergraduate courses in the UK, with an annual intake of 2700 students per year (CDMT, 2021). Only one out of 105 survey respondents had no formal training; 89.52% attended drama school to some level.

Participants were open to discussing their training experiences. Several participants found their training to be emotionally and physically challenging. This largely came down to staff attitudes and treatment, as well as a lack of awareness of well-being. Dawn, who had been in the industry for 15 years, recalled her tutors, *"treating us like workhorses instead of treating us like artists, budding artists."* Moreover, she noted a lack of consideration for performer longevity and tutors *"putting a lot of pressure to just deliver, deliver, deliver, instead of seeing you."* The mindset of Dawn's tutors is reminiscent of the tortured artist concept - the belief that performers should suffer to create *"authentic art"* (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023; Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 7; Moyle, 2012). This kind of aggressive language is not uncommon in actor training, having been previously discussed by Seton (2010).

Participants in the same age group as Dawn spoke of similar experiences in training where *"mental health wasn't really a thing"* (Mason) and described being educated by a *"different generation"* (Gregory). Speaking as though mental health is a *"thing"* now, some established performers believe training to be different nowadays. In reality, however, it is not that simple. For the youngest participants in the study, there was a range of training experiences. Aaron, who graduated only two years ago, shared sentiments similar to Mason's. He described mental health as something that *"certainly wasn't discussed while training,"* even though *"drama school training is this very intense, very emotional experience."* Aaron highlights how, despite experts in Phase One noting a shift post-pandemic of greater awareness of performer well-being, this has yet to fully materialise in the experiences of recent graduates. There remains a lack of awareness of mental health within training institutions, which aligns with Fenton's (2022) calls for greater presence of well-being education in the curriculum. The answer to why performers remain determined to pursue musical theatre despite their emotionally challenging training experiences circles back to their career calling. Despite immense pressure to deliver, many performers simply do not see other careers as an option.

More performers shed light on their challenging training experiences. For example, Nathan said,

"most people have the same sort of story in terms of their musical theatre training, it's not whether they hated it or not, it's to what extent did they hate their training? People forget [pause] that teaching is a career outside of performing, and it requires a level of training and belief in your craft. When people don't book jobs in musical theatre, they start teaching. Not because they want to, but because they have to."

Nathan's claim that most graduates, to some extent, hated their training may not be entirely accurate. Kenny, for instance, had a vastly different experience in drama school. He felt prepared for the industry and was grateful to his teachers, stating they *"gave a lot to me."* Despite this, Nathan highlights a reality for many performers: they go into teaching to survive

financially (Bernard et al., 2023; Donovan, 2023). Of course, many musical theatre teachers are incredibly passionate about their craft, but for some, teaching is a means to an end and can take time away from what they want to prioritise— performing (Bernard et al., 2023). Of those not in contract, in the present study, the most common income stream (36.73%) was creative work outside the musical theatre industry, such as teaching or performing. Teaching is a relatively common career choice for performers to supplement their income. It is, however, crucial that those who do pursue teaching are fully equipped to do so, as literature on other industries warns of the dangers of untrained teachers taking on the role too early in their careers (Mills, 2004). With greater awareness of teaching as a craft, the industry could move away from narratives such as the tortured artist (Alacovska, & Kärreman, 2023). Furthermore, the importance of employability skills and how to navigate portfolio careers cannot be underestimated during training in the arts (Beckham-Turner, 2025; Pitts et al., 2024). Performers must be adaptable in order to navigate the turbulent nature of portfolio careers and be emotionally prepared for what is often a horizontal career (Bridgstock, 2011; Hall, 2002). Furthermore, a positive outlook is required for performers who teach. Regardless of whether teaching itself is something they “*have to do*” or “*want to*” in order to pursue their career calling, they must be aware of how their approach to teaching could impact students' well-being.

There were differing opinions among participants regarding the extent to which it is a training institution's responsibility to prepare students for the industry fully. Some performers, like Dawn, said there are elements to a career in musical theatre that must be learned “*on the job*” because Dawn “*doesn't know if anyone can really train you for eight shows a week.*” Olive echoed the need for learning throughout a career when she said, “*I don't think you're ever prepared,*” which is “*a good thing.*” Olive continued, describing how “*you get to keep learning as you go [...] I think that what was instilled [...] at college is like, how to be the best company member [...] how to be the person that everybody wants to hire.*” For Dawn and Olive, the demands of the industry are something that graduates are not prepared for, and possibly never

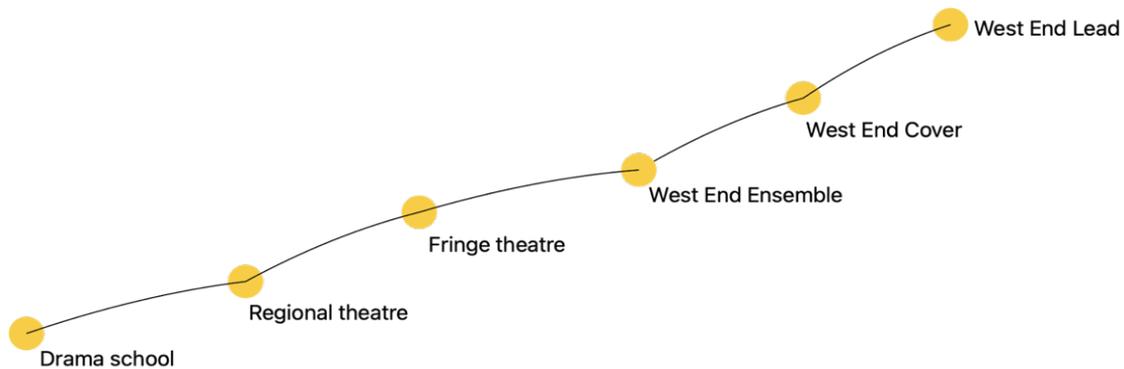
could be. The stamina required by the industry seemingly cannot be taught. Instead, there is a focus on preparing students to be likeable team players who strive to be the best company members. This provides more nuance to existing research regarding the notion of learning on the job (O'Bryan & Harrison, 2024). This echoes research into other professions in the arts, including classical musicians who cite needing to be versatile and learn "*on the job*" (Pitts et al., 2024, p. 112). Given the plethora of genres that make up musical theatre, it is impossible for training institutions to teach every style of musical theatre song, acting and dance, particularly as new styles continue to develop (Green et al., 2014; O'Bryan & Harrison, 2024). Thus, "*the person that everybody wants to hire*" means being both a team player and having adaptability to learn different styles (Diamond, 2021; He & Martincich, 2023). Training institutions have a responsibility to teach these skills in adapting to the possible requirements of a show, but after that, performers "*learn as they go*," applying what they were taught to their careers in the industry.

Some performers felt emotionally unprepared for the industry, particularly regarding rejection. For example, Mason said, "*emotionally absolutely not, was not prepared [...] Not one bit. I mean, I don't know how you teach someone to receive and accept a no, mentally and emotionally, maybe that's not possible.*" Other performers, like Ethan, shared similar experiences, stating "*it took a really long time*" to get used to rejection. This could be linked to the notion of being "*green*" and new to the industry, as performers must become accustomed to the nature of auditions (Smith & Eyer, 2015, p. 8). For Harry, it happened much more quickly: "*It only took a year of me being in the industry, [and] then rejection didn't really mean rejection anymore.*" From this perspective, rejection is another skill that must be learned "*on the job.*" Harry and Ethan felt equipped to cope with rejection after some time in the industry. However, with greater emphasis on the emotional demands of the industry during training, performers could feel more confident receiving a *no* sooner than waiting until they learn "*on the job.*" This could help prevent new graduates from experiencing such an emotional toll of rejection as Mason did.

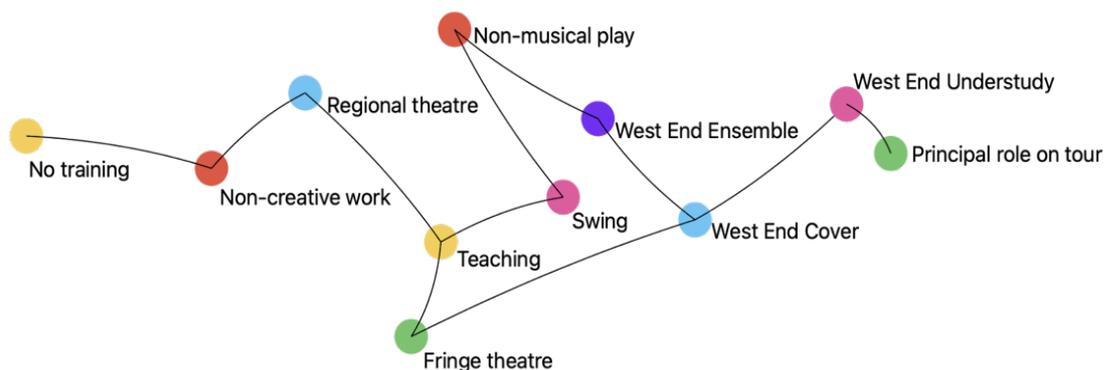
For other performers, the previously mentioned *"continuous cycle of rejection"* that Walker and Commander (2017) cite is very real (p. 262). Numerous participants described having to *"fight"* in auditions. For example, Isabel said, *"You have to fight for your auditions, and you fight in there [...] you very much feel like you're starting from the beginning every single time."* In addition, Ross described spending his *"adult life fighting for work and not doing other things I'm passionate about. I'm still nothing to this industry in the grand scheme of things."* Isabel and Ross have both been in the industry for 17 years, yet they feel they are fighting for their place as if it were their first time. Here, Isabel and Ross highlight the emotional toll that horizontal careers can put on performers. Ross was in the ensemble/ understudy and described a feeling of worthlessness to the industry, despite a proposed shift of greater respect for these cover roles during the COVID-19 pandemic mentioned in Phase One and in literature (Elster, 2023). Ross' experience implies that greater appreciation for understudies during the pandemic might have been short-lived. Mason, who had been in the industry for 12 years, echoed this. He felt he had *"proven"* himself following the *"textbook"* of how to succeed, having done regional, fringe theatre, ensemble and cover work. However, he described *"finding it harder to get into the room for really good quality stuff."* Mason's experience encapsulated the expectation and disappointment associated with career calling, which is visualised in Figure 8. Despite many entering the industry hoping to work towards a dream role and pursue a vertical career, it is rarely as simple as that (Foster, 2013).

Figure 8: Diagram visualising some performers' expectations of a vertical career versus the more common reality of a horizontal career

Vertical Career Expectation



Horizontal Career Progression



Despite feeling as though he is “*nothing to this industry*,” Ross’s reasoning for staying in the industry was simply put: “*I enjoy being onstage, and I’m good at my job, so I keep pushing.*” Ross’s frustrations provide further evidence of the double-edged sword of career calling; he places such weight on the act of performance that he overlooks the challenges. For Ross, in particular, this is very raw. In his survey response, he wrote a considerable passage about his experiences and provided his contact details for an interview. However, when he was approached for an interview, Ross failed to respond. Given that he had an extremely high burnout score of 91.67 out of a 100, he might have been too exhausted to engage, though I was unable to investigate the reasons, and he may have been too busy or unwilling to talk

further on the topic. Career calling and passion for the industry do not prepare performers for the realities of musical theatre careers, with rejection after rejection. It could be argued that career calling can be, instead, detrimental. This is because a calling can create false expectations of the industry, making performers emotionally unprepared for the often horizontal nature of the career (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023; Cinque et al., 2021; Seife, 2022). Therefore, young performers must be educated on the realities of careers in musical theatre, understanding the nature of horizontal and portfolio careers to ensure they have realistic expectations when they enter the industry. Previous literature by Fenton (2022) has called for this, but these findings further highlight the importance of career preparation with detailed performer experiences and empirical data on the prevalence of burnout.

Emotionally preparing students for the industry is perhaps even more pertinent for performers with protected characteristics. Disabled performer Lucy, for instance, said she *graduated "armed with all the technique [...but] I don't think drama schools fully prepare you for the downtimes."* Lucy felt equipped with skills for performance, but was unprepared for how to navigate periods between contracts. This supports research, which states the value that training institutions can provide in helping performers hone their performance skills, but how they can neglect vital career sustainability skills, like how to cope with rejection and periods of unemployment (Beckham-Turner, 2025; Prior et al., 2015). Lucy continued,

"The industry just wasn't ready for me when I graduated [...] No one really prepared me for what I would have to do to get into the industry. Most of my fellow students left and followed quite a standard path into musicals [...] I think it was just bothering me that I was getting in the room so little. And when I was, it didn't feel right. I'd go in and just feel like I was there to be seen for a tick box exercise or just to be seen because they need a disabled actor."

Lucy's experience upon graduating was starkly different from that of her peers. Lucy felt unprepared for how challenging it would be to find work in today's industry, particularly as a disabled performer. Band et al. (2011) have previously highlighted the lack of expertise of

educators in teaching students with disabilities. Lucy's experience provides greater detail on the uncomfortable effects of inequities on performers. She felt casting directors were seeing her for auditions to tick a box, thereby undermining Lucy's skills as a performer. Moreover, it highlights how current diversity initiatives focusing on tokenistic casting strategies do not do enough to genuinely improve representation and instead limit performers by forcing them into boxes.

Lucy is not alone in her experience; Bella also spoke of being unprepared for the industry:

"Being physically disabled and having a neurodivergencey is very all-consuming especially in such a vulnerable space like an arts audition. None of it was really geared towards people like me, and so I felt very unsupported going into education. Let alone then during that education to [then] go into the industry itself."

Bella's experience shows what the lack of accessibility in training institutions can feel like; she felt unsupported before she had even begun her career. A recent report from Beyond Europe supports these findings as disabled students felt *"not invited"* in a space that does not *"recognise the diversity that exists in society"* (On the Move, 2023, p. 57). Training institutions have influence across the industry, and thus the opportunity to set the standard for making the arts accessible (On the Move, 2023). Research has previously emphasised how actor training could better support neurodiverse students (Whitfield, 2019). Glen (2023) highlights simple adaptations that can be made to acting exercises, for instance, focusing less on using empathy to read a scene partner's emotions and instead building an imaginative scenario together. This could facilitate a safer space for all, not just neurodiverse students. This kind of awareness is needed throughout all stages of training. Institutions have a responsibility to equip educators to fully support disabled students throughout their time at drama school and prepare them for a career in musical theatre. These findings have built upon Phase One, detailing the importance of preparation for the industry for all performers, but crucially those with protected

characteristics. This is only the beginning of discussions of inequities and is expanded upon in greater detail in Theme 2 (see Chapter 4.4).

4.3.4 Conclusion

The theme of career calling plays a central role in understanding the careers of professional musical theatre performers in the UK. These findings build on expert interviews from Phase One, crucially providing more detail from performers' perspectives. Theme 1 supports and expands upon existing literature. Findings show the prevalence of career calling among performers in the study, and show that it is possible to maintain a calling over the course of a musical theatre career. Findings also provide evidence of the double-edged sword of career calling in the specific context of musical theatre, with some performers feeling frustrated but unable to leave the industry. Additionally, performers' training experiences showed the perpetuating tortured artist concept and the need for greater emotional support both in training and in preparation for the industry. Performers out of contract often rely on teaching to supplement their income. It is vital that musical theatre teachers are fully engaged in their teaching craft, even if the primary reason for their teaching is financial stability. Performers found it challenging to navigate the horizontal nature of their careers, which aligns with Fenton's (2022) framework on musical theatre career capital. Career calling helps to explain the "*sustained occupational commitment*" performers exhibit despite the lack of vertical career progression (Jansson et al., 2023, p. 76).

Findings support Fenton's (2022) career competencies framework, which details the knowledge required to pursue a musical theatre performance career. A key area Fenton (2022) emphasises is the need for knowledge of the realities of the non-linear career. Findings from the present study support this, as it is crucial that students are prepared for what will likely be a horizontal career in order to come to terms with rejection. Training institutions must equip performers with key performance skills to enable them the confidence to learn on the job, as the plethora of styles that make up musical theatre are impossible to master entirely

during training alone. Findings also support the notion that career calling provides motivation to remain in such a demanding industry. Phase Two provides new insight into the experience of disabled performers and the effects of inequities. Disabled performers' experiences in the industry are shaped by inequities that begin when they get into training. Given the obstacles that disabled performers are currently facing, one questions whether disabled performers might have an even stronger sense of career calling. Lucy felt the industry was not ready for her when she graduated, so there is a clear need for staff to have specific accessibility training to support their students. It is not the responsibility of disabled performers to adapt; it is the industry that must change.

Career calling has proved central to musical theatre performers' careers. The concept helps to explain why performers choose to stay in such a demanding industry. The passion and identity that performers have with the industry feed into all aspects of their careers and are discussed in subsequent themes. Therefore, it forms the first element of the framework of this study.

4.4 Theme 2: The changing culture within productions

4.4.1 Introduction to Theme 2

Theme 2 explores how performers spoke of the culture of the industry today. The central underlying concept of this theme is how the industry is changing. However, there remain areas that need further change, specifically in regard to opening up the industry to more performers and tackling inequalities. It builds closely upon Theme 4, *culture within productions*, in Phase One. During Phase One, experts highlighted family-like structures in casts and perceptions towards Global Majority performers and casting shifts. In Phase Two, sub-theme A explores

current audition processes. Sub-theme B, C and D detail the experiences of performers with protected characteristics in response to recent casting shifts, touching on disability, race, and parents. Sub-theme E explores cultures within casts, which can vary between a supportive and competitive culture. The culture within productions is central to understanding musical theatre careers and contributes to the framework of this study.

4.4.2 Sub-theme A: Audition processes

During interviews, performers spoke of the often arduous and lengthy process of musical theatre auditions. For example, Isabel noted musical theatre auditions taking *“three and four [rounds] and I've heard many more times for that one job.”* She described how performers are, of course, not guaranteed to get a job even though they may have invested time and energy in preparing and travelling to and from auditions. Isabel continued, explaining that *“producers and creative teams don't know you, so they need to know you. And you sort of get the impression that perhaps they've got the time and the money to be spending on this stuff. So, they're gonna take that time. It's just the way that I guess the nature of that beast has evolved.”* Isabel did not seem resentful of auditions taking many rounds, as she stated that it is simply how the industry has developed. However, taking into account the many rounds of auditions, with previously discussed frustrations of starting again and fighting for one's place in auditions, the process can undoubtedly be draining for some performers.

This expands on findings from Phase One, when experts spoke of the lengthy nature of musical theatre auditions. Isaac, for instance, described musical theatre auditions as sometimes consisting of eight rounds, particularly with commercial international shows. This supports existing literature by Weiss and Gaffney (2015), who previously spoke of the complexity of audition rounds and the lengthy process involved before performers even have a chance of receiving a payment. It also reiterates the idea of performers needing an *x factor*, which speaks to the importance of showcasing their individuality and standing out from what can be incredibly saturated auditions (Flom, 2016; Seton, 2007).

Curiously, however, many performers' auditions varied from the traditional process. Instead of extensive "cattle call auditions," which involve large numbers of auditionees and limited time for directors to see everyone (Flom, 2016, p. 12; Weiss & Gaffney, 2015), performers described experiencing fewer audition rounds and getting offered auditions through word of mouth. For example, Lucy explained, "Well, I didn't actually audition, weirdly [...] I was invited to go along and read the part of [Julie], and I think they heard about me [...] through someone I went to college with." James' experience was similar, stating, "I didn't really have much of an audition process. It was [...] through sort of word of mouth and experience from working with the choreographer previously, having auditioned for the director before." Lucy and James both had short audition processes, largely because the production team already knew them. This speaks to the small nature of the industry that was touched upon in Phase One.

The small nature of the industry is seemingly perpetuated by word-of-mouth auditions, as only those within the right circles are included. Harry explained,

"If I go to an audition, I'll know half the room [but I've got] friends who are as good if not better than me, who are my casting, who aren't even being seen for it, aren't even in the room being auditioned for it."

Harry exposes the fundamental disadvantage that those outside the close circle are faced with. Reminiscent of the three tiers of actors, many performers miss out on the opportunity to even audition (Layder, 1984). When asked in a follow-up question whether producers are excluding performers outside these circles, Harry said producers are instead "playing it safe." Whether producers are actively trying to exclude performers by "playing it safe," the outcome remains the same.

Given the current economic climate of the industry, it is understandable that producers are under various constraints and unable to hold extensive open auditions (Morgan, 2022; Salvador, 2021). However, there can be creative ways of opening up spaces and changing the culture of auditions for the better. For example, numerous participants spoke of the value

of self-tape auditions. Isabel and Mason both noted the benefit of having self-tape auditions for the first round in order for casting directors to see more performers, ultimately reducing wasted time for both performers and production teams. Somewhat controversially, some casting teams have taken to social media to open up auditions to an even wider pool. For example, the 2024 UK tour of *Dear Evan Hansen* opened its casting to TikTok entries (Wood & Millward, 2024). Despite the perceived value in making auditions more accessible to a wider range of performers, Bella criticised these casting techniques as more of a publicity stunt than an effort to diversify casting. Social media initiatives should be the beginning to help casting teams develop more creative ways to open up auditions.

Participants observed that it is essential that casting teams make auditions accessible to those outside an elite circle. Lucy explains the danger when the industry remains closed off, *“it becomes a small collection of people monopolising the industry, and it then takes more work and time for new people to break through.”* Lucy highlights how a limited group of performers getting audition opportunities could further fuel the closed circle, as it becomes increasingly hard for others to get seen. Lucy continued, explaining,

“The industry tends to favour those who don't have as many access needs, so that they can kind of tick the disabled box without actually putting much effort in. But it means that we end up seeing a lot of representation of one disability and a small collection of actors without really delving deeper into the pool.”

Here, Lucy provides insight into how the issue of *“monopolising the industry”* can negatively impact performers with protected characteristics. Lucy spoke of laziness from producers to tick a box for the representation of disabled performers. As a result, only those with fewer access needs are granted access to the industry, and thus, a limited number of experiences are portrayed onstage. By not *“really delving deeper into the pool,”* production teams forgo the opportunity to be creative in finding paths to celebrate and include a huge array of disabled experiences onstage. Disabled performers should be welcomed into roles that may not have historically been played by a disabled performer, and infuse their experiences into the

characters. As discussed in Chapter 1.5.4, the character of Nessarose, a wheelchair user in one of the longest-running and most popular musicals of all time, *Wicked* (2003), has never been played by a wheelchair user on the West End (Gumushan, 2025). This renders the role “*decidedly unrepresentative*” (Parrott, 2019, p. 151). Moreover, the Apollo Victoria Theatre, which *Wicked* is home to, is inaccessible backstage for a wheelchair user; thus, a structural change is needed before a disabled performer could play Nessarose (Parrott, 2019). Alongside increased representation and accessibility backstage, it is vital that more funding is allocated to stories that are written and led by disabled production teams that tell of their unique experiences, which would help to move away from damaging narratives that fuel stereotypical depictions of disabled people and diversify the stories told (Parrott, 2019). These findings highlight the direction industry professionals should move towards by opening up audition spaces and championing more disabled performers, writers and creatives.

4.4.3 Sub-theme B: Inequities — Disability

It is important, in the context of understanding the culture of musical theatre productions, to address the inequities that performers of marginalised communities face. Inequities can feed into every aspect of musical theatre performers’ careers, so they are relevant to all the discussed themes in Phase Two. As previously discussed, disabled performers in the present study spoke of numerous challenges they face within the industry. For example, disabled performers Aaron, Bella, and Lucy all spoke of challenges in finding casting opportunities. Reluctantly, when Lucy was seen for auditions, she spoke of it often not feeling right and as if her presence was simply for a “*tick box exercise*.”

All three disabled performers interviewed as part of the present study spoke of the burden of additional responsibilities put on them by others. These included extra responsibilities on and offstage; crucially, these factors are not something that their non-disabled counterparts have to manage. For example, Lucy was expected to act as an

additional dramaturg and provide choreographic input in her most recent show. Lucy explained,

“With choreography, for instance [pause] I’ve always been expected to sort myself out [...] they’d demonstrate the movements and teach everyone. And I’d be sat there thinking, “okay, so how do I do this?” But I would be expected to just adapt it on the fly [pause] being told, yeah, left foot then right foot. That means nothing to me. And it was an issue [pause] especially when there were multiple wheelchair users doing the same moves because we’ve done different adaptations of the same move.”

The choreography was not accessible to the whole cast. Furthermore, when adaptations were clearly needed for the wheelchair users in the cast to perform the choreography, the performers were responsible for adjusting the movement. The failure to accommodate the needs of the cast put extra pressure on Lucy and her peers. This could have been avoided if there had been open conversations between the choreographer and cast from the outset of the contract, which highlights the importance of strong communication and how production teams must include disabled performers in planning and wholly understand their needs (On the Move, 2023).

Additionally, in the same production, Lucy described having to become a *“disability dramaturg spokesperson.”* This involved providing insight to the production teams on appropriate language and experiences as a disabled person, something that Lucy *“struggled with because I just wanted to go in and just be an actor.”* The production team expected Lucy to provide dramaturgical insights, something outside her role as a performer. Lucy’s experience speaks to findings in existing research that highlight the unfair responsibilities imposed on disabled artists to provide guidance for addressing inequalities when their role is to be a performer, not an educator (On the Move, 2021). Instead, there needs to be greater representation of disabled people in the production team in line with a key disability rights movement slogan, *“Nothing about us, without us”* (Charlton, 1998, p. 14). It is crucial to have more disabled people in senior roles, including those classed as *“gatekeepers”* such as

producers, to tackle inequities and remove the additional responsibilities put onto performers (On the Move, 2021, p.16). This would ensure the right voices are in the room throughout the creative process and prevent productions from needing a performer to become a last-minute dramaturg.

Alongside greater representation across levels of the industry, the role of access consultant has the potential to improve the experiences of disabled performers significantly. Bella and Lucy both described a vital need for qualified access consultants. Bella explained how the role

“makes sure that everyone's access needs at all times are being met. It makes sure there's no microaggressions. They are the person in charge of checking that venues are accessible so that you don't rock up and then suddenly the performer can't get to their dressing room.”

Something as simple as using a dressing room can be made impossible by a lack of accessibility backstage. In recent years, there has been an increase in budgets in performing arts organisations dedicated to increasing accessibility; however, many of these initiatives remain focused on improving accessibility for audiences rather than artists (On the Move, 2023). An access rider is a document detailing the needs of a performer and should be discussed at the start of a contract and updated throughout; they must be actioned by production teams (see Disability Arts Online for a guide on writing access riders; Hemsley, 2020). Access consultants are an essential piece of the puzzle in ensuring productions are inclusive and accessible. This is even more vital on tour when performers travel nightly to new venues. Access consultants ensure that producers take action to meet the performers' access requirements. Crucially, a qualified access consultant supports disabled performers in doing their jobs—being performers—and helps prevent them from being asked to take on additional responsibilities.

That is, of course, when access consultants are sufficiently qualified for the role. Otherwise, performers are left with even greater responsibilities. Lucy experienced this failure

when she needed a doctor's appointment and *"they sent me the link of a doctor's surgery that was up three flights of stairs."* As a wheelchair user, Lucy explained that attending the appointment would not be possible. Lucy continued,

"I think access managers and coordinators are so important in helping those shows happen and be possible eight shows a week. But I don't think we've got the role quite right yet. And I think there are some wonderful access managers out there. But I don't think mainstream, especially mainstream musical theatre, they're not used to it. So they don't know the right places to look. Because the person we had wasn't an access manager [...] that wasn't their past, so they didn't know about Access to Work or anything like that. And that was quite stressful."

Lucy acknowledged that while there are some *"wonderful access managers,"* she has encountered others who lack the required knowledge for the role. Access to Work is a government scheme designed to support disabled people, and it is shocking that someone in an access role was unaware of the scheme (GOV, n.d.). Lucy highlights the industry-wide policy and awareness needed to ensure the role of access manager properly supports disabled performers. Sadly, Lucy is not alone in her experience, which speaks to wider research on the performing arts calling for more accessibility within the arts at all levels (On the Move, 2023). These findings highlight the persisting inequities that disabled performers are forced to navigate and thus the need for drastic change within the industry.

Notably, one-third of survey respondents identified with the term triple threat, the most popular label among performers. However, only two out of ten disabled respondents identified with the triple threat label. The remaining disabled respondents identified with Actor ($n=4$) and Performer ($n=4$). The relatively small number of disabled performers who identified with the term triple threat aligns with literature, which argues this label is exclusionary and ableist (Knapp, 2016; Yates, 2020). These figures call for greater consideration of the language used to describe performers.

4.4.4 Sub-theme C: Inequities — Race

Despite campaigns and initiatives addressing the lack of diversity within the arts, aligning with research, performers spoke of remaining inequities (Malik & Shankley, 2020; Stamatou, 2020). Numerous performers spoke of challenges regarding their race when being cast, including the issue of typecasting. For example, James, a self-described triple threat swing, who has been in the industry for 11 years, described his experience:

“I feel, as someone who's half English, half Chinese, [...] I've kind of straddled this balance of being [...] to a Westerner, I'm probably seen as more Chinese but to a Chinese person, I'm seen as more Western. So in the UK, I feel like there has been an increase in trying to have some more, I guess, Southeast Asian representation. So I am being put up for things [...] but in those [shows], I think they're actually looking for fully Chinese identifying or Southeast Asian, whereas I'm kind of on the cusp where I can kind of get away with it, but I'm not necessarily maybe the look they're after [...] It is a strange one for me sometimes to navigate because I'm like sometimes, 'which one am I?' And I know I'm both, but when it comes to casting [...] I'm like 'I am that' but I'm also not. So [...] anytime there's a job that comes up for a Southeast Asian person [...] am I gonna be at a disadvantage because someone else is gonna be able to fit the brief a little better than I am? Even though I am half Chinese.”

Casting teams and audiences perceive James differently based on his appearance as a Global Majority performer. James disclosed that it is “a *strange one*” for him to navigate, as he questioned, “*which one am I?*” James’ experience highlights the absurdity of typecasting and pigeonholing performers into boxes, as performers are multifaceted, complex individuals who do not fit neatly into a predetermined box. Varhola (2023) previously wrote of the challenges of having a mixed ethnicity in musical theatre, noting the experience of Michael K. Lee, an Asian American dancer, who identified as American but was perceived by audiences as “*foreign*” (Varhola, 2023, p. 186). Needing to adapt one’s identity to fit into a box or assimilate

into a culture can be incredibly damaging to a performer's well-being, and instead, performers should be involved in creating or adapting their characters in ways that embrace the individuality of their identities (Davis, 2024). Performer Eva Noblezada previously described, *"Being in Miss Saigon gave me such a f*cked up 'myself identity' because I didn't know who I was. I was a Filipino playing a Vietnamese woman, and everyone in the cast felt the same"* (Visaya, 2022, para. 16). Noblezada's experience is not unusual, as Davis (2024) found many Global Majority performers have encountered directors who have forced them to *"modify"* or *"erase"* their identities in *"ethnically ambiguous"* roles, for instance, the monolithic representation of Asianness in musical theatre (p. 20; Kwan, 2025). The increase James has seen in Southeast Asian representation is, of course, positive, but the industry needs to change how it approaches diversity. The industry must move away from forcing performers into boxes and into a more inclusive casting approach, which should begin with listening to and discussing with performers how their identity can inform their characters (Davis, 2024). As Davis (2024) writes, *"truly colour conscious casting gives members of marginalised groups opportunities to play real, developed characters, not one-dimensional stereotypes"* and also crucially agency to infuse their identities into these characters (p. 135).

Performers navigated an array of stereotyped assumptions based on appearance. For example, Mason described that during his early career, he assumed he could *"do anything"* but soon found that casting directors were unsure what *box* he fit into. Mason said his appearance *confused* casting teams because stereotypically, bass vocalists are *tall* and have a *"big barrelling chest."* Mason noted his voice teacher during training was

"six [foot] five, white, from America [...] probably the stereotype of what an operatic bass was [pause] is. I'll never forget he said to me that [pause] I'll need to eat more so that I can get bigger [...] [In] his collection of students, I was the odd man out physically, I didn't look like any of them [pause] and they all quite resembled him, actually. I'm so glad I didn't take that [pause] well I took it to heart. I'm glad I didn't follow suit."

Mason's experience highlights how stereotypes exist around voice types, restricting performers. Mason felt he was the *"odd man out"* based on his height, size and race. Mason said that he *"took it to heart"* and later explained that although he feels at his stage in life he is *"the most comfortable with who I am, as a human being, confidence wise, how I look how whatever, everything about me"* discussions of appearance *"still trigger me because of what I experienced in my first year of college."* Fifteen years later, Mason remains *triggered* by his experiences, highlighting how damaging stereotypes and supposed guidance from educators can be. These findings contribute to research on the impact of stereotypes on students and the pressure to disprove them, which was touched upon in Phase One when Musical Theatre Educator Andrew highlighted the expectations put on Global Majority performers. This contributes to wider literature on the experiences of Black students in higher education, highlighting the impacts of stereotypes and the additional barriers Black students face because of racism (Stoll et al., 2025). This calls for an urgent need for educators to actively challenge stereotypes, shifting to a space where performers are encouraged to be authentically themselves and bring their individuality to roles they play.

Other performers provided further insights into the realities of typecasting. These findings build on Phase One, when Musical Director Leo described how current industry approaches to diversity can lead to performers being *"tick-boxed and put into a box where they are only considered for inverted commas, 'the Asian shows' or 'the Black shows'".* Performer Fern spoke of her experience being typecast in the *"Black shows."*

"People that just keep saying, 'you'll be perfect for this show' and I'm like, there's nothing about my ability or what you've seen from me that will let you know that I'm perfect for it, it's just literally that I'm Black."

Fern was understandably frustrated, describing the reality of performers being put in boxes based on race. This mindset undermines a performer's skill and craft. Fern is not alone in her experience, for instance, in an interview for the Blacktor's Studio, Canadian musical theatre performer Vanessa Sears said when she graduated, she wanted to prove the industry wrong

and play roles outside of the *“really, really narrow lens of what [they thought] I could do”* (Domingue, 2024, p. 9). Typecasting has been a topic of recent literature, with Neff (2024) writing of the typecasting of characters in shows like *Six (2017)*. Neff highlights that the role of Anna of Cleves, who is described as physically ugly and aggressive, has historically been played by Black actors. While Jane Seymour, who the other queens aspire to, has historically been played by white actors. Neff (2024) emphasises that regardless of whether in the future Seymour is played by a Global Majority performer, the legacy of an *“able-bodied, thin, white woman”* will continue to haunt the role (p. 148). Fern’s experience shows how typecasting impacts performers’ experiences in the UK industry, which develops from racist stereotyping and unfairly restricts performers.

Other performers detailed similar experiences, witnessing increased diversity and yet remaining inequities exhibited through tokenism. For example, Nathan described his current West End show as consisting of *“16 named white characters and three non-white characters.”* Nathan’s show clearly has an issue of tokenistic representation, with such a poor ratio of white to non-white characters. Nathan continues,

“Most of the guys in the dressing room have five covers, based on my [...] ethnicity, I’m not allowed to cover more than one [role] because [...] there are no other non-white male tracks to cover [...] Say this is a character, like, who’s a jock. I’m closer to that appearance than someone who actually covers it, but the only difference is that they are white, and I’m not [...] When it comes down to pay, you are paid around £30 [...] per cover. So based on my ethnicity, I have to be the lowest-paid ensemble member because there’s only one character I can cover. So yeah, I’m paid less for being non-white, which is quite bizarre [...] It is not a piece about race. I just wish they had initially written in some characters who weren’t entirely white, or at least characters they weren’t fixed on only being able to be played by white actors, you know?”

Nathan's dissection of the payment structures of cover roles and revealing that he is ultimately paid less based on his ethnicity is shocking. Moreover, it is perplexing that Nathan's appearance is closer to a character's role description than his white counterparts who cover the role. As Nathan says, "*it is not a piece about race,*" so it is staggering that most of the characters are "*fixed [on being] played by white actors*". Nathan's experience speaks to the default whiteness in the musical theatre industry; unless Global Majority experiences are explicitly written into productions, often a default whiteness is assumed (Warren, 2025). Davis (2024) previously called for musical theatre creatives to ask themselves whether a character's race is "*relevant to the story, and if not, specify that*" (p. 134). Moreover, this mindless casting would be revealed if the show were forced to be cancelled due to insufficient cover available. Thus, not only does this type of casting fuel systems of hierarchy based on ethnicity, but it also does not make economic sense for producers. Restricting a performer to covering just one role if their peers cover five could result in the show being unable to go ahead, ultimately losing the producer money.

Featuring just three non-white characters and restricting the number of roles performers can cover based on ethnicity is an example of tokenistic casting. This kind of tokenism is used as a method of good publicity that white producers can profit from (Saha, 2024). Saha (2024) explains how the dominant culture (white-middle class men) can "*appear to accommodate the demands of minoritized groups while protecting its own status and privilege,*" and thus whiteness remains the default (p.20; Artis, 2025). On the surface, this West End show might appear to be at least somewhat diverse to audiences, but these changes are merely "*performative*" and inequities continue to persist offstage in the lack of equality in pay (Davis, 2024, p. 135). This speaks to a report into the wider sector that found freelancers describe the industry claims of being inclusive as "*just a word and not reality*" (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2023, p. 3). Nathan's experience provides evidence of default whiteness in musical theatre in the UK, uncovering persisting inequities regarding cover allocation and pay. These findings support existing literature that calls for holistic

practices that promote truly inclusive casting and authorship (Stamatiou, 2020). Inclusive authorship with greater representation of marginalised groups in writer and director roles in musical theatre is crucial in developing shows that challenge stereotypes and tackle inequities.

4.4.5 Sub-theme D: Inequities — Parents

Performers spoke of inequities within the industry regarding parents. Performers described the nature of the industry as not being accommodating to parents, for instance, survey respondent Quinn noted: *“Coming back to work as a parent into an industry that is so demanding of your whole life and time has been very draining and difficult. It feels like a near impossible career to manage as a parent.”* Quinn speaks of the all-consuming nature of musical theatre and the physical and physiological demands of the industry being at odds with life as a parent. Unsurprisingly, Quinn’s well-being scores indicated an above-average level of burnout (79.17), highlighting concern with the clear lack of support for parents. Productions have a responsibility to make musical theatre accessible and manageable for parents. Where productions are lacking, organisations like the aforementioned Parents and Carers in Performing Arts (PiPA) have formed in the UK (PiPA, 2023). Organisations such as PiPA support performers who are parents with resources, toolkits, networks, and more. Quinn’s experience speaks to the challenge of maintaining a healthy work-life balance as a parent in the industry. She is not alone, as research has highlighted how irregular working hours are one of the biggest challenges parents in the industry face (McDowall et al., 2019). The all-consuming nature of musical theatre, with its physical and psychological demands, makes being a parent feel impossible. Other performers’ experiences of navigating work-life balance, something that was discussed in Phase One, are further discussed in Theme 6 (see Chapter 4.8).

Ethan provides further insight, sharing his experience of auditioning as a parent. He said, *“I had an audition and [having a family] put a massive mark against my name and I didn't get the job and the person [that] did get the job doesn't have a family [pause] I*

can't do a show that has a Sunday matinee because that's two shows on a Saturday, a Sunday matinee that's [pause] when am I supposed to see my kids? [pause] I think that the answer to it is job sharing."

Ethan felt that having a family disadvantaged him in his audition. He also further highlights how performance schedules can have a huge impact on parents' work-life balance, questioning when he would be able to spend time with his children with such a demanding schedule. In recent years, producers have continued to push the limits of performers' schedules, increasing the number of matinees and extra performances around Christmas to cater to seasonal audiences (Hemley, 2022). In addition, some productions have seen an increase in the number of shows per week throughout the year, with some moving up from eight to nine shows a week. Balancing eight shows a week with caring responsibilities is already challenging, with 43% of performers who left the industry "*identified caring responsibilities as the main contributing factor*" (McDowall et al., 2019, p. 5). Ethan posed a solution of job sharing to help parents navigate demanding schedules, a topic that has been debated in recent years. Some argue that for job sharing to work, the performances must be divided equally, or the performers could be perceived as an understudy and lead (Taylor, 2021). Despite its benefits, job-sharing remains very rare within the industry, and for it to become more frequent, producers need to be more open to considering different ways of casting (McDowall et al., 2019).

For some interviewees and scholars alike, inequities towards parents in the industry disproportionately affect mothers. For example, Isabel said, "*I hear much more of women that have left the industry because they have had children, and they haven't been able to make it work.*" This aligns closely with Brook et al. (2020), who argues that the musical theatre and cultural industry more broadly favour childless men over mothers. Isabel's description also touches on the notion of the "*maternal/paternal wall*," a metaphor for how being a parent can halt career progression (Williams, 2005). Closely linked to inequities relating to motherhood are class-based inequalities, which are equally important to address but were not discussed

by performers as part of this project. In addition, Isabel described the positive impact on performers who are mothers when there is parental representation in the production team. Isabel said, *“If there's a mum that is the director, then she's probably going to be aware because she needs the same things. She needs also to perhaps have an extra hour in the morning to sort out the kids before she comes to do her job. So, it's really helpful.”* Isabel highlights the value of having mothers in senior roles in musical theatre, as they might have experienced challenges similar to those faced by mothers in the cast. Representation of mothers and women in senior roles in musical theatre is crucial in addressing inequities, as they can challenge stereotypes and support casts from their experiences (Leonard, 2013).

Performers spoke less about experiencing ageism in the industry than experts in Phase One. This is likely due to the relatively young average age of participants in Phase Two, 31.54 years old. Many of the experts in Phase One described being in the industry for decades, which is perhaps why the topic of ageism was more prevalent for experts.

4.4.6 Sub-theme E: Supportive culture versus competitive

The final sub-theme of theme 2 to be discussed is the varying cultures within casts. Aligning with research and what experts noted in Phase One, there is a family-like culture for many performers within productions. This family culture, however, can have both positive and negative impacts on performers. For example, Harry said, *“I think that with my current company, we are viewed as like a family and we're all coming together to make the show happen.”* For Harry, there is a positive morale that comes from the supportive, family-like company. In contrast, for Nathan, the *family* metaphor has gone too far and negatively impacts him. He said, *“Because we are literally playing school children at points, I think there is this sort of warped mentality that we are children. Because that's what we play onstage. And it's sort of like, it's a tricky thing to navigate. And it's like, ‘Just to remind you, I am actually an adult playing a child.’ You know?”* The production team seem to confuse performers with the

characters they play. Blurring performers with characters creates a power imbalance between performers and the production team. This echoes findings in Phase One and Berne's (1975) transactional analysis theory: performers as the Child and the production team as the Critical Parent. It is also reminiscent of the traditional *master-apprentice* relationship found in actor training, something that is being challenged in the industry and research today (Prior, 2012). For Nathan, it seems one-sided, the creative taking on the role of parent. However, it is concerning as performers might begin to assume a child-like role over time and feel unable to speak out if there are difficulties within the production for fear of being *told off*. Nathan and Harry's experiences highlight how a family-like culture within a production can be both positive and negative for performers. Thus, establishing a supportive environment that empowers casts is vital.

Similar to Harry, numerous other performers described being part of a supportive cast. For Lucy, this entailed a company that could have open, meaningful conversations and be comfortable with each other:

"We had really intense discussions [...] about disability [...] what it is to be a parent, and masculinity [...] everyone felt really comfortable with each other and talking about all these things."

Lucy's positive experience with her cast highlights the value of feeling comfortable with one's peers. As discussions in Phase One and research by Burkhart (2017) show, close relationships between cast members can positively impact well-being. Moreover, Lucy highlights the increased value that a supportive cast can have for performers from marginalised communities. The first step in addressing inequities is open conversations that allow people from marginalised groups to share their experiences. Lucy's experience shows, first-hand, the value of these discussions in facilitating a comfortable and inclusive environment for all performers. Another crucial step in addressing inequities is encouraging all performers to speak out when they encounter challenges. Bella explained, *"There are more nondisabled people than there are disabled people, so if it is only the people that it affects*

speaking up about it, it's never gonna change." It is crucial, therefore, that performers are aware of and understand the needs of their castmates to support each other fully. Thus, supportive casts are essential for subjective well-being on a personal level and key in tackling inequities within the industry. These findings counter perceptions of a family-like bond between cast members as a *facade*, discussed in Phase One; Lucy and Bella's engagement with peers seems genuine and far removed from performative.

A supportive cast can also be crucial for the role of swing. Kenny explained,

"My fellow swings, we all just kind of came together. And any bits of choreo [...] that one of us didn't have the other person did, or any formations that one of us like may have missed on because we were had to be like somewhere else in a separate rehearsal for something else. We all just shared everything with each other because it just made it so much simpler [...] We just reassured each other every day."

Kenny spoke of the realities and challenges of being a swing, but how working as a team made the process easier. This echoes writing by Smith and Eyer (2015), who developed a swing guide detailing the value in sharing notes and teaching choreography to fellow swings. Kenny's experience of a supportive network among swings shows that specific roles can foster small family groups within a company.

In contrast to the supportive nature of casts, performers emphasised that a family-like company is not always the case. Calvin, for instance, explained how cast dynamics vary. He said, *"I have worked in companies [that are] euphoric because people took the work seriously, but not themselves seriously [pause] and then I've been in companies where it's been unpleasant."* Kenny expanded on this, stating,

"You know [...] it's drama, at the end of the day, clue's in the name, there's always going to be drama. There's always going to be people who think highly of themselves and expect some things a certain way. Because it's always been done that way for them or think they are better than other people."

Kenny and Calvin offer insights into how the dynamics between cast members can vary. Using the term “*drama*,” Kenny implies bickering and perhaps even passive aggression within the company. Maxwell et al. (2020) previously argued that performers often tend towards passive-aggressive behaviour to avoid being seen as a *problem* and risk losing future contracts. This speaks to the small nature of the industry, where auditions are often obtained through word of mouth, and performers must appear agreeable. Additionally, Kenny stating, “*because it’s always been done that way for them*,” implies a hierarchy triggered by age or length of time in the industry, aligning with current research (Maxwell et al., 2020). These findings provide evidence that production cultures can vary. In one show, performers may encounter a supportive family culture, and in the next, a cast with *drama*. It highlights the need for a shift in industry culture that encourages openness and teamwork, where performers treat each other equitably rather than based on hierarchy within a cast.

4.4.7 Conclusion

Theme 2 has further developed on the findings from Phase One and the literature on the culture within productions today. It contributes to the understanding of musical theatre performers’ careers as it uncovers the varied experiences that one can have in casts throughout a career. Crucially, theme 2 highlights key industry elements that need changing, from persisting inequities to structures of power imbalance and representation.

Findings help to develop a clearer understanding of the complex environment in which performers exist today. Dynamics can vary considerably between casts, from supportive to competitive. Findings show the importance of being adaptable, participating in open discussions, and being willing to speak up with fellow cast members when facing inequities. The importance of access manager and consultant roles was revealed, and how they can be pivotal in the experiences of disabled performers in their casts. Production teams should proactively engage with disabled performers prior to the start of a contract to help limit additional responsibilities, including dramaturgical and choreographic inputs being put onto

disabled performers. Access riders should be discussed from the outset of a contract and amended throughout. Word-of-mouth auditions fuel a closed circle industry that drastically affects representation onstage. Therefore, it is essential that casting teams take steps to make auditions more accessible to those outside an elite, small circle.

Furthermore, casting teams should not discriminate against parents, and producers have a responsibility to support parents in their casts. More consideration is needed for the role that job-sharing could play in helping parents who are performers to stay and thrive in the industry. Producers and company managers should consider how scheduling rehearsals and performances affects the whole company.

The most significant finding is that diversity initiatives are not doing enough to address inequities in the industry. Inequities discussed by performers were largely in relation to disability, race, and parenthood. Productions, on the surface, might appear to be inclusive and diverse, but performers' experiences tell a different story. Findings reiterate the importance of truly colour-conscious casting that embraces the identities of performers by helping them to incorporate their identities into the characters they play. Tokenism onstage has not led to real change and avoids addressing the persisting problems of inequity. Findings revealed how it is essential that all industry professionals acknowledge any bias and privilege they have, create welcoming spaces for all and support initiatives that challenge inequities, prioritise inclusive authorship and increase representation of people from marginalised communities at all levels (Fragkou & Benzie, 2025; Stamatiou, 2020).

4.5 Theme 3: The demanding nature of musical theatre

4.5.1 Introduction to Theme 3

The central concept of theme 3 is that musical theatre is physically and psychologically demanding, and how these demands affect performers varies. Sub-theme A discusses the physical demands associated with a musical theatre performance career, and sub-theme B discusses the psychological demands. Sub-theme C explores performers' experiences of demands during rehearsals, and sub-theme D explores the demands experienced outside of contract, including maintaining the body for auditions. Numerous factors are at play regarding how demanding rehearsals and performances can be for performers, including any difficult themes present in the show, whether the production is touring or static, the intensity of the role, and the unique abilities of the performer.

4.5.2 Sub-theme A: Physical demands

Performers detailed extreme physical demands that they experienced during performance contracts. For example, Dawn described the intense physical strain that her body was subjected to during a year-long contract:

“It was physically challenging. It was vocally demanding [...] [There is a sense of] sometimes not realising how tired you are, how sore you are. It can really just creep in slowly over a year. And then you realise one day, “Oh I’m broken, I’m a bit broken.” And then it’s undoing all of the repetitive strain stuff that has created that can be hard.”

Dawn exhibited feelings of shock at how “broken” her body had become over the course of the contract. The physical demands of performance on Dawn’s body, specifically her voice,

were intense, and she only became aware of the toll of performing when she was already experiencing repetitive strain injuries. Thus, there is immense importance in the support network of company managers, physiotherapists and peers proactively checking in with performers and performers themselves having an acute awareness of their own health. These actions would prevent the need to “undo” the effects of a demanding role after a contract has ended. Performers must develop a mindset that prioritises well-being and realises the value of warm-ups and cool-downs in injury prevention (Flynn, 2025; Gaskill & Hetzel, 2017). Dawn’s experience supports findings from Phase One, further emphasising the need for physical check-ins with physiotherapists and how it is essential that the physical well-being of performers is supported, particularly throughout long contracts.

Other performers also shed light on the physical toll that performance can take on their bodies, speaking of the fatigue they experienced in their contracts. Vicky and Sean, for instance, described putting all their energy into performances. Sean said, “*When you first open a show, you feel you have nothing but energy for the performance,*” and Vicky noted “*often feel[ing] lethargic during the day,*” lacking in the “*energy to do menial tasks*” and having “*to work extra hard to find energy for evening shows.*” These performers conserve all their energy for performance, leaving little else for life outside musical theatre. This raises the topic of work-life balance, which is discussed in more detail in Theme 6 (see Chapter 4.8). For Sean, the energy required for performance is particularly high when a show first opens, which suggests that performers get accustomed to the demands and find ways to conserve energy. In contrast, Vicky spoke of “*often*” lacking energy, implying a lack of energy throughout the contract. Vicky provides further insight into findings from Phase One, when Neil described, “*The main challenge is learning what is sustainable and how you can sustain it yourself and not get injured.*” A careful negotiation is required between energy for performance and conserving enough energy for life outside work. Performers are all unique and must learn what is sustainable for themselves.

Vicky is not alone in her experience, as Harry also noted tiredness throughout his contract, stating, *“We’ve all got pull-out beds in our dressing rooms. So we all end up sleeping in our dressing rooms before the show.”* Harry and his castmates were so tired that they had to sleep at work. For Harry, sleeping in his dressing room before the show seemed normal and in a profession with such physical exertion, it is perhaps not surprising. Fenton (2022) previously found that musical theatre performers experience fatigue and called for future research to investigate how performers can better manage their sleep. During the project, Vicky and Harry were both in contract and scored a high level of personal burnout (50 and 62.5, respectively). Although Harry seemed accustomed to sleeping at work, his burnout score does raise concern that long term, his well-being could be more affected by his work. High levels of burnout are concerning, as performers could be heading towards injury or even more serious burnout. Performance schedules must allow performers sufficient rest to recover and maintain their well-being. These findings highlight the physical demands associated with performance and the level of fatigue performers manage when performing eight shows a week.

Lucy outlined a lack of awareness from production teams of the physical demands wheelchair users can face. She explained,

“I was having to do a lot of stretching a lot of like, care myself to make sure that my body was okay with that because I just don’t think people quite clock how much work you’re doing on your shoulders [...] when you use a wheelchair, especially [on a large stage] it’s not all nearby. And I know that when my [understudy] went on for [Julie] for a few shows, she was really in pain with her shoulders after a few days. And she was like, ‘I don’t think I could do, like, a week.’ And [...] we were kind of like saying that, maybe we could have done with massages and sports things throughout. But we didn’t ask for it. So it’s kind of our fault.”

Lucy detailed the physical strain her shoulders were subjected to during the contract and the need for stretching following performances. This echoes literature by Seton et al. (2019), who

found actors often incorporated stretching and yoga into their cool-down routines following shows, which could be even more essential for disabled performers. Lucy described the production team not being aware of how the large stage might impact wheelchair users and, consequently, the need for physical well-being support to be put in place. The understudy for Lucy's role seemed to struggle even more and was underprepared for the physical demands of the role, eight shows a week. It is alarming that Lucy's understudy thought she would not have been able to perform eight shows a week as, during a long contract, an understudy would likely be required to perform for numerous consecutive shows, often called an *understudy run* (Cook, 2019). If that situation had arisen, Lucy's understudy could have experienced injury and burnout due to a lack of physical preparation. The production team is responsible for ensuring that performers receive sufficient support and that the show's requirements are manageable. Lucy and her understudy both felt that it was their responsibility to ask for physical well-being support. However, one could argue it is the production team's responsibility to inform performers of the available support at the start of a contract. This knowledge would empower performers to take up support when needed and possibly help reduce stigma in asking for help (James & Lazarczuk, 2019). An open dialogue between the production team and performers about the demands of performance and available support is even more pertinent for disabled performers like Lucy. Production teams should strive to ensure all performers feel safe and fully supported to do their jobs sustainably. Overall, performers all navigate the physical demands of performance differently, and so it is crucial each performer develops an understanding of how to manage eight shows a week uniquely to them. This knowledge forms part of this study's musical theatre performance career framework, as managing physical well-being is essential in leading a sustainable musical theatre career.

4.5.3 Sub-theme B: Psychological demands

Performers also spoke of the psychological demands of performance and described a “*psychological cost*” to musical theatre (Walker & Commander, 2017, p. 262). For example, Olive said,

“Like, eight shows a week, we're not saving lives. I will say that too. But you know, it's a full, it's mental, it's physical, it's spiritual, in some people's experience, it takes, it can take from you [...] We're conditioned to like, work hard, work hard, and actually, that leads to burnout, and I have been there.”

Olive described performing eight shows a week as all-encompassing and spoke of a physical and psychological burnout from her career. Describing musical theatre as *taking* something from some performers suggests a “*psychological cost*” to performance. Olive spoke of the unhealthy mindset instilled in performers to push themselves to work so hard that it leads to burnout, admitting that she has, too, “*been there.*” The repetition of eight shows a week might exacerbate the psychological demands of performance if it begins to *take* something from performers. This is reminiscent of the previously mentioned tortured artist concept, as musical theatre performance can come at the cost of performer well-being (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023; Gross & Musgrave, 2020, p. 7; Moyle, 2012).

In addition to the challenge of performing eight shows a week, performers cited other factors as contributing to burnout. The first to be discussed is the emotional impact of touring. A total of 23 out of 105 participants in the study were either currently performing in a touring production or their most recent contract was on tour (21.90%). Olive described touring “*as its own beast,*” suggesting that the demands of touring require specific attention from performers. In addition, Olive noted, “*When you are on tour, you are in a bubble,*” which could allude to the bond that performers often form on tour when they are away from their home support network (Burkhart, 2017). However, being in a bubble also suggests isolation and even feelings of being trapped.

Fern provided insight into the realities of touring and her experiences of isolation as a performer with protected characteristics:

“The scariest bit was when I realised I’m in a foreign country as a vulnerable disabled young woman and I’m going all these places I’ve never been to and I have absolutely [pause] like my one support and system that I started to kind of build at home in London. It’s very far away. I have no one. [...] People might try to reach out to people in power or whatever, but you start to realise [...] that the people that are in power ultimately, their priority is that the show goes on”

Fern felt an emotional strain from touring and being away from her support network. Fern’s experience was heightened, given her intersectionality, as a “disabled young woman” in a foreign country, with seemingly no support from the production team. It seems she felt the producers’ priority was making sure the show goes on, and they were not open to listening to performers’ needs; this is explored further in Theme 4, *the show must not always go on*. Research has previously uncovered the isolation performers can experience on tour while living alongside often new cast mates (Maxwell et al., 2020; Moyle, 2012). For most performers, being on tour means they are away from their usual support network; however, for some performers, such as Fern, being away is even more challenging and isolating. Thus, greater psychological support for touring productions would benefit the entire cast but is vital for those managing additional factors, such as those in a foreign country and performers with protected characteristics.

Many of the findings so far have shown that performer experiences can vary significantly between casts due to the attitudes and priorities of producers, and touring is no different. Lucy found touring scary, but was reassured as she was able to access support from her company manager:

“Every venue, I’d go and see a different physio, which was a little bit scary [...] But our company manager was amazing. Like [to] every physio [...] she sent a kind of a document, like not a long document, but just explaining like about my [body] and

about when not to like touch [...] So I felt really like reassured with that.”

The nature of touring means that performers might encounter different physiotherapists at each venue, which is understandably unsettling. With a simple letter detailing Lucy’s needs, the company manager was able to provide Lucy with reassurance and support. This highlights how physical and psychological support are intertwined. Lucy’s positive experience shows the value of trust and communication between company managers and performers. It demonstrates how, when the right support is in place, the psychological and physical demands of touring can be more manageable.

Performers had differing views regarding how emotionally demanding the content of musical theatre shows can feel, which aligns with findings from Phase One. For some performers, shows with challenging subjects affected their psychological well-being, particularly in long contracts. In attempts to uphold anonymity, specific themes and shows are not discussed, but the genre of musical theatre has long featured distressing themes of abuse, suicide, violence and child abuse, in shows such as *Carousel* (1945), *Dear Evan Hansen* (2016) and *Waitress* (2016) (Sherman et al., 2021). Ethan said, for instance,

“If you're doing a heavy piece [it can be] unbelievably difficult to drag yourself out of it [...] when you're onstage, you have to BE the person that you are. And if you're doing that for eight shows a week for six months, 12 months if you're playing a very heavy role it's absolutely gonna get into your head.”

Gregory also commented, *“Especially the longer 12-month contracts in musicals [...] something is infused. You're not that person in real life, but there's something [pause] you're infused.”* Maintaining mental well-being requires ongoing attention during longer contracts, as performers can feel *“infused”* with their character; they must monitor the line between playing and *“being”* a character. When asked whether he has any techniques to get out of character, Ethan replied, *“I box. I go and stand in front of a bag and I hit it really, really hard until I feel normal.”* Ethan was confident in the cool-down technique he uses in managing the transition in and out of character performance, highlighting how sustaining one’s well-being is unique to

each performer. To describe needing to “be” the character and feeling as though it is “infused” with oneself brings up connotations of method acting, a much-debated acting approach (Brown, 2019). Aligning with research of actors in other genres, such as film, musical theatre performers must develop effective cool-down techniques to maintain well-being long-term and boundaries between characters and self (Brown, 2019).

Lucy shared a similar experience of the emotional toll of performing difficult themes that was further intensified by being on tour:

“I was on tour, I was very lonely and also dealing with those subject matters night after night in quite a public setting. And I was kind of almost, if I'm being honest, a little bit depressed by the end of that run, and was really relieved when I finished it, because I just felt like it was too much, and actually it's only talking about it now, but I think, yeah, why the heck wasn't I going to see [pause] speak to someone about those themes? Because that was a lot, yeah, a lot.”

For Lucy, the interview seemed to provide a chance for reflection, revealing how challenging the contract was to navigate. She described feeling “*depressed by the end of that run*” and, upon reflection, seemed disappointed and shocked at the lack of support she received. The difficult content of the show proved challenging to separate from, as Lucy spoke of great relief when the contract was finished. Lucy’s experience highlights the combined impact of isolation on tour, lack of emotional well-being support and difficult subject themes. This expands on current research on the sometimes-long-lasting, immense psychological impacts of performing in emotionally challenging roles like Fantine in *Les Misérables* (1985) (Kumar, 2019; Sherman et al., 2021). Numerous scholars have spoken of the emotional hangover that can come from performance. The emotional hangover is certainly present within these findings and further reiterates the importance of de-roling after shows and at the end of a contract (Geer, 1993; Kurtz, 2011; Panoutsos, 2021; Sacay-Bagwell, 2013; Seton et al., 2019). These findings also build on what experts noted in Phase One. For example, when Hannah described an actor who she knew struggled to perform difficult themes eight times a week:

“Really takes its toll because you have to just get into a place where it feels real. And so he is desperate for his next role to be like a comedy role”

Performers in the present study provided further insight into the experience Hannah described. It is clear that a “*psychological cost*” can come from performing musical theatre, particularly when difficult themes are present.

In contrast, performing difficult themes can sometimes be cathartic for performers. For example, Lucy described her experience in a recent contract: *“The themes felt [pause] it all felt quite therapeutic for me in a way, especially with my character.”* Lucy offered further details of the similarities between herself and her character, which are not included for reasons of anonymity, but offer insight into how some themes, even if emotionally difficult, can provide a release for performers. Lucy’s experience of catharsis when performing difficult themes varies from the depressed feelings she described previously, demonstrating how the impact of challenging themes can vary significantly for the same performer in different contracts. Harry shared a similar experience:

“The show in general is emotionally taxing [taxing]. [I’m an onstage chaperone for child actor] so I’m very emotionally connected to that, especially because I’m quite close to the kids as well. So then it always [pause] always I get a bit too emotionally connected to it. So it is a bit emotionally taxing. And at the start of the process, I think I was finding it quite draining emotionally, but then I talked to one of the [principal performers] and he was like, ‘Ah! I find it like a good release. Like if I get too connected to it like that emotional connection, each show is actually a release for anything else in life.’ And so I started thinking of it like that, and that’s really helped.”

Harry initially found the performance emotionally taxing due to feeling emotionally connected to the story and characters. However, over the course of the contract, he was able to alter his perspective. Harry spoke with a fellow cast member, highlighting the value of informal support within a cast. Treating performing as *“a release for anything else in life”* helped Harry manage the emotional toll of performing challenging themes. Although it is, of course, positive that

Harry had become more comfortable performing in the demanding show, one questions whether Harry and the principal performer might need further support to help navigate their feelings. Later, Harry spoke of the extensive psychological support available in the company, but how he had chosen not to use it. This support might have been useful as another emotional outlet alongside the release from performing. These findings build on Phase One, where experts noted an intense and cathartic side to performing. However, it is paramount that performers find sustainable ways to manage this catharsis. Some find performing difficult themes emotionally draining, which can be further worsened by the isolation of being on tour. While others can cope with the demands of difficult themes by using performing as an emotional release. These findings highlight how the extent to which difficult themes impact performers can vary from one show to the next and differ for every performer.

Isabel offered further insights into how the content of musical theatre shows can affect performers. She said,

“I think it's quite easy in musical theatre to [shake off characters] because I don't know how deep it is. Dare I say that. I feel like a lot of the time[...] people come there for I guess the songs and obviously there's story in those songs, but I think what happens, as a detriment to a lot of musical theatre shows, is that the book isn't always as strong [...] So for that reason I think, for me it's really easy to kind of disassociate, once I leave something, and I've never been in anything personally that has made me feel like, ‘Oh I'm still holding this.’ Though, I guess [my most recent show is] [...] probably [the] one show that I think emotionally has perhaps stayed with me or stuck with me a bit more because of the humanness.”

Isabel questioned the emotional content of musical theatre when she said, *“I don't know how deep it is. Dare I say that.”* Although this might seem controversial, this thinking is not unusual. For instance, experts in Phase One and literature alike have discussed misconceptions around the seriousness of musical theatre and how many argue the genre does not feature trauma or difficult themes (Francesca, Phase One; Meierdirks, 2023; Napier, 2008). Isabel explained

further how she finds it “*really easy to kind of disassociate*” from the content of musical theatre shows due to the book being weaker than the songs. Isabel speaks to recent discourse in the industry surrounding the strength of books in musical theatre in telling the story (Benedict, 2022). London theatre critic Benedict (2022) cites *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) and *Evita* (1978) as two shows with “*weak books but wonderful scores*” that they argue work better as one off concert-stagings rather than full productions (para. 7). Isabel admits, however, that her most recent show has “*stuck*” with her “*because of the humanness*” of the show. For Isabel, it is more challenging to separate from her character when there is greater humanness to a show, perhaps referring to characters based on true stories. While there are countless examples of fantasy musicals, such as *Starlight Express* (1984) and *Wicked* (2003), there are also many examples of realistic musicals, including biographic stories such as *Tina* (2018) and *Ain't too Proud* (2017), as well as musicals based on events or places, like *Standing at the Sky's Edge* (2023). Performers may encounter different challenges depending on the show's content and how much they relate to the story. Panero (2019) previously explored the blurring of self with character and detailed the danger when actors connect with their characters based on personal experiences, particularly when these experiences are traumatic. Overall, even performers who feel confident creating emotional boundaries may experience an emotional hangover or blurring of self and character in their careers. How performers react to a show's psychological demands can vary drastically from person to person and depending on the show's content. There is a potential “*psychological cost*,” particularly when engaging with difficult themes, so considering and preparing for new productions is a vital element of this study's musical theatre performance career framework.

4.5.4 Sub-theme C: Rehearsal demands

Performers discussed the demands they experienced during rehearsals. Isabel, for instance, found rehearsals physically exhausting: “*So we rehearsed for five weeks, we tech-ed for about four days, which was wild, very, very long days.*” Isabel's intense rehearsal and tech processes

are not uncommon. During Phase One, experts also spoke of tiring and intense rehearsal periods. For example, Elliot said, *“weeks and weeks of technical rehearsals” for a tour, working “from 11 to 11, just doing scene after scene.”* Furthermore, Leo described the *“hugely welcomed”* recent Equity union agreement between performers and producers that demanded a five-day work week during rehearsals (Equity, 2023). These findings combine to highlight the intensity of musical theatre rehearsal periods for performers.

Performer Gregory detailed the challenges he faced in rehearsals when comparing himself to his castmates. He explained, *“The rehearsal period was a real struggle. I was having panic attacks. I was suffering from imposter syndrome. I just thought ‘I’m not here. I shouldn’t be here. I’m not as good as everyone else.’”* Gregory openly spoke about the challenges to his psychological well-being that he experienced, expressing extreme self-doubt. During Phase One, well-being practitioner Francesca encountered performers who questioned whether they were *“good enough,”* and in the literature, more widely, self-doubt is shown to be prevalent among performing artists (Clegg & Clements, 2024; Seton et al., 2019). In a study by Fenton (2022), performers also experienced imposter syndrome during rehearsals, thus Gregory’s experience provides further evidence that success in an audition and securing a role does not fix self-doubt as imposter syndrome can persist when in contract. Therefore, well-being support is required from the outset of contracts to help performers navigate feelings of imposter syndrome that can occur at any stage of a contract.

Performers also spoke of the challenges of difficult themes in rehearsals. Aaron and Calvin offered two different perspectives on the role of cover/understudy. For Aaron, the repetitive nature of rehearsing scenes back-to-back was emotionally demanding:

“The [emotionally traumatic] scene in the show happens once, and then it’s done. In the rehearsal process it happens again and again and again, because we’re re-blocking it and reworking it. And so [...] I was kind of finding my way to yeah to distance myself from it and the kind of plot a course of how I’m going [pause] like how I would get through it. And I think I certainly benefited from being, [pause] being the

offstage cover and meaning that I could be an outsider, for that I didn't have to be physically doing it kind of through the entire rehearsal process until kind of cover rehearsals began [...] I very much did the work myself to know that I was as ready as I could be."

Aaron spoke openly about how emotionally charged parts of the show resonated with his personal experience, which he found challenging to rehearse repeatedly. Aaron described spending time planning how he would navigate the difficult themes in order to feel prepared to perform in the show. Aaron described benefiting from "being an outsider," as he only had to rehearse the scene during cover rehearsals.

In contrast, Calvin found the limited time afforded for cover rehearsals exacerbated the challenge of performing difficult themes. Calvin described how the "[Principal performer could rehearse] for hours and hours and hours, whereas for me, we went through that scene at speed once, and it was a scene that I won't go into it too much, but I found very triggering."

This reiterates how performers' reactions to difficult themes are unique, with performers finding different themes challenging and triggering (Panero, 2019). Both performers had different experiences of being a cover in a show with difficult themes. The time constraints of intense rehearsal periods prevented Calvin from feeling confident performing the challenging scene. Calvin continued,

*"If I was going onstage opposite some of those cast like you're talking about [award winning] really and also whatever with the awards whatever with all that stuff, actors [who] I think [are] f***ing amazing. If I'm going on opposite them, it's not [pause] exciting when you're not anywhere near ready for that [pause] like imposter syndrome doesn't come close in that scenario."*

With a lack of rehearsal, Calvin experienced performance anxiety or "stage fright" performing alongside performers he admired. This supports current research on dancers, showing how a lack of rehearsal can unsurprisingly make performers feel unprepared and anxious, fuelling feelings of imposter syndrome (Clegg & Clements, 2024). This demonstrates how the time

pressures of rehearsals can limit the care taken for performers' well-being and ensure they feel sufficiently prepared. Aaron and Calvin's experiences highlight how performers who play cover roles can differ in how they wish to navigate rehearsals of difficult themes.

4.5.5 Sub-theme D: Demands outside contract

Given the intensity of rehearsals and performances, one might expect trends of higher burnout among performers in versus outside contract. However, no trends of burnout based on contract status were found; instead, being out of contract brings its own physical and psychological demands. For example, Dawn explained the need to maintain fitness and skill level while not in contract: *"It's keeping the instrument like the whole body finely tuned enough to at least just be able to get through some auditions,"* and *"It's akin to being an athlete in how much self-maintenance it can require."* For Dawn, just to be able to *"get through some auditions"* requires precise physical and psychological preparation. The physical preparation that Dawn spoke of could include physiotherapy, which, although provided in contract, can be a financial burden for performers outside contract (Harper, 2012). Dawn added, *"The psychological aspect of being out of work and then having to justify to all of the kind of non-theatre people in your life, justify your existence and all those hoops you jump through."* It is unclear precisely what Dawn was referring to when she spoke of *"the psychological aspect,"* but it could be emotional impacts that being outside contract can elicit, regarding perhaps identity and financial precarity (Maxwell et al., 2018). She also highlighted the challenge of navigating judgments from *"non-theatre people."* This contributes to previous research on how pursuing a career in the arts is often stigmatised, with performers continuously made to justify and defend their career choices to those around them (Dimen-Wagner, 2017; Seife, 2022). Of course, how easy performers find it to mitigate the judgments of others and remain focused on their chosen career varies. Undoubtedly, the strength of one's career calling plays a part in managing this demand, as during long periods out of contract, many performers question their identity and place in the industry (Maxwell et al., 2018).

Other performers shed light on the loneliness they experience after a contract has come to an end. For example, Una explained:

“You were part of a tight knit family, being paid regularly and doing something you love every day. Then you're dropped back into the deep end with no emotional support and into an industry that doesn't properly start auditioning until Spring. It's extremely daunting and plays havoc on your mental health.”

Una seemed daunted, knowing the lack of support and isolation is a recurrence at the end of every contract. This cycle is another example of a psychological cost that can come with a musical theatre performance career. Una's experience speaks to a “*withdrawal*” that previous research found dancers felt from such an intense experience coming to an end (Clegg & Clements, 2024, p. 91). Olive described a similar sentiment when she said, “*Sometimes you don't feel like you have a community when you're not on a show [because] your show can be your community.*” Una and Olive's experiences further support the previously discussed temporary family narrative of Phase One. However, while casts form close relationships in contract, they disband at the end of a run. Performers like Una might benefit from any well-being support offered by a production to be made available to performers in the subsequent weeks following a contract ending, to help them navigate this period. Where support is unavailable from productions, industry organisation Applause for Thought have set up an initiative to support performers who are out of contract, titled *Applause for the In-between Bit* (2025). The initiative is accessible as it is free, takes place online and aims to create a community of likeminded artists that listen and support each other (Applause for Thought, 2025). This kind of support is precisely what performers like Una and Olive need during the daunting and sometimes lonely process of being out of contract.

Alongside isolation, performers struggled with financial pressures when out of contract. For example, Kenny said,

“I don't want to be serving customers in a restaurant all day. When I'd rather be onstage doing something like that and then using that money to pay the bills and being

able to enjoy what I do every day.”

Kenny spoke of a desire to be able to perform and enjoy working rather than doing a job in hospitality in order to survive financially. This builds on findings from Phase One and research that highlight the prevalence of survival jobs, which are typically low-income and flexible work (Donovan, 2023, p. 301; Harvie, 2009; Maxwell et al., 2015; McAuliffe, 1977; Throsby & Zednik, 2011). Notions of career calling are present in Kenny’s interview as he exhibits a calling to be onstage, where he enjoys working so much more than being a waiter. Kenny and the other performers in this study did not make specific reference to the cost-of-living crisis, but it is likely, given the current economic climate, that financial pressures are even greater than usual (Morgan, 2022). In addition, Gregory spoke of his experience of financial instability across his career:

“I do sometimes feel a little bit [...] frustrated because sometimes you just want security. I don’t really want to be worrying about finances after 30 years of investing in this career. But I have to, and if I want to continue being onstage [...] I might earn 60, 70 grand [one year and then] another year, 25 grand.”

Gregory sacrifices financial security in order to pursue a career onstage. Gregory’s experience shows the realities of creative freelance careers, with earnings drastically different from one year to another. The financial precarity of the creative industries means that for many other performers, pursuing a career in the industry long-term becomes near impossible due to class-based inequities (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013). These findings highlight the turbulent cycle of financial instability that performers should be aware of before entering the industry, as financial precarity can be present throughout the entirety of a musical theatre performance career.

4.5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, performers experience a variety of physical and psychological demands throughout their careers. During contract, these demands included physical strain, fatigue, imposter syndrome, and burnout. Production teams are responsible for discussing each cast

member's needs and abilities and, in line with the recent Equity union agreement, should structure rehearsals with a two-day weekend to help performers avoid burnout. Communication could help production teams become more aware of how different elements of the show might affect a cast member, for instance, large staging can be physically demanding for some disabled performers. Crucially, performers must be supported in determining what is sustainable for them to do eight shows a week, as everyone is affected by demands differently. Developing a mindset that prioritises well-being can help performers manage performance demands, monitoring their health closely and utilising cool-down and warm-up exercises. The psychological demands that performers experience are exacerbated while on tour, largely due to isolation. Therefore, it is imperative that company and access managers communicate with performers to ensure they feel safe and supported, especially while on tour. Moreover, producers have a responsibility to make performers aware of all available support at the start of contracts. This could help reduce the chance of performers delaying accessing support when they need it because of uncertainty or fear of asking for help.

Some performers were able to navigate the rehearsal and performance of difficult themes and use them as a therapeutic release. At the same time, others found it challenging to separate themselves from their character. Therefore, additional emotional support should be provided for productions with any themes that could be traumatic for performers. Equipping performers with the right skills to *cool down* and move in and out of character is imperative in training and during contracts to ensure the line between self and character does not become blurred. When entering into a contract, performers should establish how they feel and plan to navigate any difficult themes based on their previous life experiences. This support should be made available to all performers, from principals to covers, and by extension, those who are experiencing those themes frequently, such as stage crew and ushers. It is also important that covers and understudies have sufficient time allocated in rehearsals to emotionally prepare for performing difficult themes in the best way for them.

The importance of support structures both informally and formally, have been revealed. Alongside touring, periods between work can be an isolating time for performers. Therefore, pathways for performers to access support, such as through Equity union and industry well-being organisations, should be more widely advertised throughout the industry. Navigating financial precarity is often particularly challenging when outside contract, but is something that many performers navigate across their careers. Raising awareness of discounted psychological and physical well-being support for performers outside of contract is crucial. Overall, communication is imperative between the production team and cast to understand performers' needs and help them maintain their physical and psychological well-being. These findings contribute to this study's musical theatre performance career framework as they highlight the array of psychological and physical demands that performers are forced to navigate throughout their careers and how the same demands are experienced and managed differently by performers.

4.6 Theme 4: The show must not always go on

4.6.1 Introduction to Theme 4

Findings highlighted variations in how performers feel about “*the show must go on*” (TSMGO) mantra, a narrative previously discussed in Phase One, where experts spoke of a change in attitude towards the mantra since the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite differences in opinion, performers were united by the central concept that TSMGO should be on their terms and used to positively bring a cast together rather than something imposed upon them by management.

4.6.2 Sub-theme A: Subscribing to TSMGO and the perceived positives

While many performers acknowledged the importance of setting boundaries and prioritising health and well-being over performance, they simultaneously described going to extreme lengths to ensure they continue to perform. Therefore, there exists a discrepancy between performers' attitudes and their behaviours. Fern exemplified this mindset when she said. *"The only time when I'm kind of like yes, 'the show must go on' is honestly when it comes to me because I push myself more than I should. I went on when I had an asthma attack."* Fern admits that her own well-being is an exception to the rule, which she uses to justify subscribing to TSMGO. This mindset is concerning, as Fern cannot set a boundary to protect her well-being and confesses to *"pushing myself more than I should."*

Other performers shared similar experiences. For example, Ethan said, *"If you're so ill that you actually can't get out of bed, there's a line."* Here, Ethan clearly states that *"there is a line"* regarding performers pushing themselves. Ethan continues: *"The thing is I'm difficult. So I broke my leg doing [the show] last year, and I was back onstage after a week. I asked them to relight my scene so that you couldn't see my broken leg because I just refused to be offstage."* The driving force behind this continued commitment to performance could be the desire to perform; Ethan simply *"refuses to be offstage."* He explained feeling immensely frustrated at the time, and disappointed that he had missed shows. This speaks to the previously discussed notion of career calling, which states that performers have an urgency and passion for performance. Ethan's passion for performance is so strong that every show counts.

Olive contributes further to this mindset, stating, *"I did think the show could have gone without me 100%, I guess I didn't want it to. I wanted to be able to do them all."* There is great pride and heroism felt from pushing through and performing in as many shows as possible, even if that is detrimental to one's well-being. Smith and Eyer (2015) previously spoke of this

competition among casts to subscribe to TSMGO as *“no one really wants to be the first one to bite the dust and call out”* (p. 40). However, they correctly highlight that once a principal performer *“calls out,”* if there is sufficient cover in the production, the show can continue as normal and provide swings and understudies the opportunity to perform. Literature by Rigopoulou (2022) investigates the experiences of older performers and encourages performers to step back. One participant said, *“If you are doing eight shows a week, sometimes it’s good to try to do seven if you have an understudy, which also means they get a chance to do the part.”* This emphasises the choice to step back from a show if a performer feels unable to perform; however, this choice is only afforded to performers when there is sufficient cover put in place by the production. If there is sufficient cover, the primary reason for pushing through and subscribing to TSMGO appears to be the performer's own pride and compulsion to perform. Overall, for some who subscribe to the TSMGO narrative, there are extreme lengths they will go to in order to continue performing, even if that is to the detriment of their well-being.

Some performers argue that there has been a shift in attitude in recent years, and TSMGO is now being used as a force for good. For example, James said,

“[TSMGO] is kind of ingrained weirdly, it’s conditioned into us [...] but I feel like it’s a little bit more [pause] sensitive now, yeah, it’s not as harsh [...] I think definitely [pause] used in a positive sense. Yeah. 100%. You know, if there are a couple of moments where the show is not looking great, or there are a few slip-ups here. But come on, guys, ‘the show must go on.’ Like, ‘yeah, we’ve got that.’”

James spoke of negative connotations of TSMGO as it was *“conditioned”* into performers during training, but has witnessed a change, suggesting a shift from previous *“unhealthy narratives”* (Abate, 2022; p. 9). Instead, more recently, the TSMGO is being used positively to boost cast morale. Bella explained a possible reason for this shift in attitude due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

“During covid, when all we wanted was for the shows to happen and we were being told [no] that there was then this massive realisation of [...] For the last however many years, we've been forcing the show to happen. And now that the show can't happen. We've actually been looking at this very much the wrong way [...] I feel like that massively changed people's mindsets of it and going, 'Ah no the show has to go on because we now want it to.' I feel like that really united cast, creatives, producers like we were all then working really, really hard towards the same goal, and I don't feel like that had happened before.”

Bella described the sudden change in the meaning of TSMGO during the COVID-19 pandemic as a mindset forced upon performers, morphing into something that unites all production members. She spoke of working towards a common goal, as a team, reiterating the previously discussed family metaphor.

This builds on findings from Phase One, which showed that experts have also witnessed a change in how the industry uses the TSMGO narrative. For example, Neil shared the same sentiments as Bella and James when he said, *“You know that horrid old [phrase] ‘the show must go on.’ Well, I don't think everyone believes that in the same way that they did.”* These findings speak to the wider sector, as a recent report into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for theatre freelancers across the industry found calls to move away from the *“unsustainable ethic”* that existed pre-COVID (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2022, p. 11). Overall, while some performers subscribe to TSMGO out of compulsion to perform, others embrace the mantra and use it to boost morale. When using the mantra to unify a cast, a distinction is made that TSMGO is not *“conditioned”* into performers but is something they consciously embrace. These findings provide nuance to the understanding of TSMGO and how the mantra remains relevant for some performers today.

4.6.3 Sub-theme B: Against the mantra TSMGO

For some performers, TSMGO remains an entirely toxic narrative that is pushed onto performers. Calvin explained his view that TSMGO is a *“bullshit narrative that has been cultivated by producers or people who are concerned with money. That’s all.”* Describing TSMGO as *“cultivated by producers”* highlights his scepticism that the narrative is ever about the performers or the overall productions’ best interest and is purely financially driven. Calvin was frustrated when discussing TSMGO as he reflected on his previous contract. This sheds more light on Calvin’s experience as an understudy who felt unsupported and underprepared for his role. Lucy shared very similar sentiments to TSMGO:

“We had a lot of pressure when we had a lot of illness in the company at, like, certain points in the run, and a lot of fatigue, like, a lot of fatigue, and people clearly needed a break. Like, I remember a few of us looking at one particular member of the cast and being like, he needs to be taken off this show for a couple of days to have a rest. And we were kind of hoping that our company manager would step in [...] but because of ‘the show must go on’ and everything and that pressure, because people were watching certain nights, and we’d be told about it.”

For the producers of Lucy’s production, ensuring the principal cast performed for high-profile audiences was of greater importance than the well-being of the cast. Pressuring the cast to perform through fatigue and illness is dangerous and could lead to burnout, injuries and mistakes onstage (Abate, 2022). Keeping the show open is, of course, a primary concern of producers, but this must be sustainable for performers too. Although performers often have strong work identities, producers must consider performers as *“humans first and artists second”* (Abate, 2022; p. 9). Harry had a similar experience: *“When I was on tour, ‘the show must go on’ no matter how ill you are, you still have to come and do the show.”* Lucy and Harry explained that the underlying problem during these productions was a distinct lack of covers.

Lucy explained how the allocation of covers was unfair and unjust in her show:

“Whereas, like most leads or supporting leads, would have two or three covers on

[this show], we [all the disabled actors] all have one. Me, like as [Julie], and [the lead] only had one cover, and that's, you know, put us in a precarious position. And really, I think like that could be, that could be reworked [...] we've got two disabled actors who were covering in this building, they can only play the disabled characters. I think that was the mentality. Well, actually, they can play whoever, and it'll be fine."

This is yet another example of additional pressure and strain being put on disabled performers, as Lucy explained, principal and supporting roles typically have more covers than she experienced. For producers, it is clearly challenging balancing the finances of paying understudies and the amount of rehearsal time with the potential cost of cancelling a show (Ryan, 2023). Lucy went on to describe a disabled actor performing as an “*emergency cover*” for a role that was usually played by a non-disabled actor and was “*just another actor onstage, you know, because she's brilliant.*” This emphasises the error the production team made in casting choices, as the disabled performer showed that a variety of performers can cover that role. With more consideration when allocating cover roles, the production could have avoided bringing in an emergency cover. Drafting in emergency covers is not unusual. Two famous examples in recent years include *Waitress* (2016) alumnus Desi Oakley being flown from New York to perform as the lead in the West End and *Six* (2017) composer Toby Marlow stepping in for Catherine Parr (Ackerman, 2019; Ephram, 2023). Although these performers are hailed as “*saving the day,*” emergency covers highlight a lack of sufficient cover in place to properly support casts (para. 1, Ackerman, 2019). Performers may feel pressure to perform with the knowledge that, without them, an emergency cover would have to be flown in. TSMGO is unfairly pushed onto performers when poor casting choices and cover allocation are made, ultimately risking performers' well-being over the course of a contract.

Lucy is not alone, as numerous other performers also spoke of a lack of cover, putting casts under pressure to perform. For example, Mason said: “*It's not that person's fault that you didn't hire enough people or you didn't hire people to give support. It's not rocket science. It really isn't.*” In addition, Olive described a member of her cast feeling under pressure to

perform: “[Maria] got really severely injured [...] I know she felt really unsupported and like she had to get better quickly, and that, it was a problem. And honestly, that was because there wasn't sufficient cover in the building.” It is concerning that performers can experience pressure to return to work after injury due to a lack of cover, as this could be detrimental to their well-being and cause further injury. Prior et al. (2015) noted that actors can feel forced to perform out of fear of losing work, thus risking injury by “soldiering on” (p. 64). These experiences point to a significant issue in the industry and provide evidence that, despite some perceived shifts, the TSMGO mantra is a damaging mindset when forced onto performers. This contributes to the framework on musical theatre performance careers as it highlights a key narrative that performers navigate, posing a need to reframe TSMGO and use it positively or reject it entirely.

4.6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, TSMGO is a complex narrative that, while it can be positive and unifying for a cast, must come from the performers themselves rather than pressure from producers. Many performers acknowledge the harmful side of TSMGO and yet subscribe to it themselves. This calls for greater awareness in the industry of the importance of setting boundaries, particularly when performers feel compelled to perform despite injury, and the dissemination of knowledge on how to manage well-being and when to rest. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some mindset shifts started to occur as productions used the mantra to boost morale, but this is not industry-wide. Performers should be encouraged to treat their own health and well-being as they would that of a friend and monitor their level of burnout closely, particularly over the course of a long contract when injuries can occur slowly. The largest issue at play is a distinct lack of covers for roles. Production teams have a duty of care to casts, and no performers should be forced to risk injury and their well-being to perform in the name of a guest in the audience or to prevent the show from being cancelled. Crucially, production teams should view performers as “*humans first and artists second*” (Abate, 2022; p. 9). Producers are

responsible for ensuring sufficient cover in productions, which includes considering all possible options for cover roles and not limiting them based on stereotypes. This would help prevent emergency covers taking place and put performers at risk of injury from a lack of rehearsal. These findings contribute to the musical theatre performance career framework, showing persisting attitudes in the industry that performers must navigate and the need for them to shift into more positive, unifying mantras.

4.7 Theme 5: Communication and clearer support pathways

4.7.1 Introduction to Theme 5

Theme 5 outlines performers' experiences of formal and informal well-being support structures in today's industry. Findings highlight the lack of industry standards for well-being support and the subsequent variation in support offered in productions. The central unifying concept of theme 5 is the need for greater communication and clearer pathways of well-being support across the industry.

4.7.2 Sub-theme A: Well-being support provided

There was a vast range of performer experiences in the well-being support available in productions. For instance, some performers detailed extensive physical and psychological support plans provided by their productions. Harry explained his experience in a West End production:

“If we have something wrong with us, and we can't get in to see a GP quickly. The company has a doctor in London on retainer that they can send us to. I mean, they'll

normally, just pump steroids in us but, but that's [pause] I mean, I've never had anything like that before. [...] We can get a physio appointment [the] next day, if we injure ourselves that evening. And it'll be like, 'Okay, go see a physio at like 11 am, have your work and then they'll report back whether or not they think you should do the show today.' And if the physio doesn't think you should do the show then you're blocked off and there's no questions about it [...] So we have once a [pause] month and a mindfulness coach comes in and you can book an appointment to speak to them kind of like a counsellor. I think it's only that infrequent because no one uses it that much, I think if there was a demand for it, they'd bring her in more."

Maintaining performers' well-being is a priority in Harry's production, with a proactive support plan to deal with physical injuries quickly, including physiotherapists and private doctors. However, Harry's description of steroids being pumped into him is reminiscent of the *sticking plaster* of well-being support that Francesca was concerned about. Are Harry and his peers receiving support to truly maintain their well-being or to get them back to performing as quickly as possible with little regard for their long-term well-being?

It is reassuring that Harry's producers listen to the guidance of physiotherapists regarding the well-being of cast members, asking "no question about it" and simply "blocking" performers from the show as needed. This is a far cry from Harry's previous production, where "no matter how ill you are, you still have to come and do the show," which perpetuated the TSMGO narrative. Moreover, Harry detailed the production's psychological well-being support, offering mindfulness and counselling sessions. He explained that the mindfulness coach comes into the production once a month, but noted that if there were greater demand, the coach would likely be brought in more frequently. Given the prevalence of injuries in West End performers, this kind of easily accessible support is imperative for performers to prevent and manage injuries (Evans et al., 1998; Stephens et al., 2021). There is such extensive physical and psychological support on offer that performers in Harry's cast can pick and choose when they utilise it. This level of support contrasts with some productions, in which the

show is prioritised above all else, and performers are forced to choose between fear of losing work and risking injury (Prior et al., 2015). Isabel also described receiving psychological well-being support in her recent regional production. She explained that the venue offers *“free therapy [for ...] two or three sessions”* to their resident staff and visiting casts. Like Harry, Isabel said it is *“the first time I’ve been in a theatre space that has that as an offering, which is great.”* This contributes to understanding musical theatre performance careers, as findings highlight the level of support offered in some productions both on the West End and regionally.

Although it is positive that Isabel and Harry are both in productions with well-being support in place, it is concerning that it is their first time encountering support of this kind. Isabel explained: *“I’ve had shows where, just like, it’s been really tough to fight for just, say a bit of physio or a vocal massage in there when, again, where’s the industry standard for that stuff?”* Isabel described fighting for essential well-being support like physiotherapy and a lack of industry-wide policy on what support should be made available to performers in contract. Additionally, Fern said, *“We don’t have a physio in-house or anything like that.”* This reinforces the unpredictable nature of the industry that experts spoke of in Phase One. Expert Daphne explained that the industry has no *“universal approach”* to well-being support. An important factor that underpins recommendations made later in this thesis is that performance requirements largely do not need to be changed aside from making accessibility accommodations. Instead, this research highlights the external factors around performance, such as preparedness and support, as critically needing change. This is encapsulated by Nathan when, in his survey response, he wrote: *“Most of it [poor well-being] is actually avoidable. There is nothing inherently harmful about musical theatre. It is all due to the toxic environment, drama, shady management, and total lack of support.”* Producers differ in the value they place on well-being support, and thus the support made available in productions can vary considerably (Flynn, 2025). The producers have the power to cultivate a supportive, warm environment where performers can be most creative. While one might expect

commercial West End productions to provide more support than smaller-scale musicals, that is not always the case. Instead, performers have experienced varying levels of support both on the West End and in smaller regional theatres. Therefore, the unpredictable nature of support stems from the producers and what support they determine should be available.

Additionally, Dawn noted that *“in an ideal world [...] you'd go for a voice massage and a full body sports massage once a week and just everyone across the board would have that and [pause] because it doesn't matter who you are [pause] it shouldn't be just the leading lady or the oldest person in the cast.”* Not only is there a lack of industry-wide policy regarding well-being support, but performers may encounter different tiers of support within the same company. In Dawn's production, well-being support was seemingly prioritised based on status within the cast and physical need. As a result, principal performers and older cast members were given priority for well-being support. However, Dawn argued that it should not *“matter who you are,”* and that support for well-being should be made available to the whole cast. The psychological and physical demands of performance can vary significantly between roles, such as swing and lead, and performers' own needs can vary drastically, so it is essential that support is not restricted and is made available to the whole cast (Fenton, 2022; Sherman, 2021; Zuim, 2021). This contributes to the musical theatre performance career framework by highlighting the variation of well-being support available in the industry. It is crucial that performers are aware of what productions can and should be putting in place, so they can reach out to their company manager or union representative for advice on accessing the support they need to lead a sustainable career.

Although well-being support is ultimately an expense for producers, an emotionally and physically healthy cast is in their interests as it can help ensure the show goes on. Olive explained how a change in approach would benefit productions and performers:

“[The mindset] ‘What can we do to help?’ Rather than, ‘Why are you asking?’ And then [...] being made to feel like you don't have the right to ask for the support when, when the support is to facilitate the show going on and being the best it can

be.”

Olive emphasised the importance of wanting to feel supported and heard in a production. Engaging with performers and openly offering support lessens the responsibility put on performers to initiate the conversation. After all, performers and producers both want the show to be *“the best it can be,”* so sustaining performers' well-being and making them feel comfortable is in the show's interest. Changing this mindset could help to mitigate the stigma that some performers still experience regarding seeking support for their injuries and well-being (Vassallo et al., 2019). Positively, Dawn did experience more proactive support in her recent show. She explained the production's motives for providing well-being support: *“We've often found company managers have been very, very willing to go ‘you need physio? Fine we'll sign you right up.’ Because I think they'd rather [...] keep you healthy than have you grind away at an injury and then be off for weeks.”* Dawn's description of *“grind[ing] away at an injury”* is not unusual, given the high prevalence of overuse injuries among musical theatre students (Stephens et al., 2021). Dawn explained that it is in the interest of performers and producers to limit long-term injuries and encourage early treatment of injuries to prevent them from worsening. Therefore, not only does well-being support help performers maintain their well-being, but it also contributes to the smooth running of a show.

Alongside formal structures of support, performers spoke of the attitudes of production teams improving their experiences of auditions and rehearsals. For example, Mason explained his experience in a recent audition:

“What stands out is that [the director], before I even opened my mouth to sing. There was a chair in the middle of the room. And he said, ‘Have a seat.’ I was like, ‘What do you mean, have a seat?’ in my head. [...] Listen, it's a machine. You go in you do your niceties. ‘Oh, hi. All right here, sing!’ [But] he sat me down, and we had a conversation. ‘How are you?’ Immediately, I just felt so at ease.”

Mason described his shock at a director taking time in his recent audition to get to know him. He outlined how this openness to conversation is unusual, as auditions can often feel like part

of a much bigger “*machine*.” Auditions are commonly described as “*cattle calls*,” which has led to the notion of “*typing out*,” when productions are so time-restricted that auditionees are lined up and asked to stay or leave based on “*look and type*” (Flom, 2016, p. 12). Calvin echoed this when he said, “*Big-scale commercial musical theatre, it's very boom, boom, boom, boom, boom [clicks]*.” Mason’s experience highlights the value of taking enough time for each performer during auditions, as small acts of kindness can drastically change an audition’s atmosphere and put performers at ease. This emphasises the need to move away from cattle call audition styles and instead focus on fostering a welcoming environment. Of course, production teams are frequently under time constraints, so in order to afford performers enough time, there has to be a funnelling process at some stage. Performers spoke of the convenience of self-tapes, which could be the answer to reducing the number of in-person auditions. This could help move away from treating auditionees as part of a “*machine*” and ensure directors have sufficient time in auditions to make performers feel comfortable. This reiterates the previously discussed idea that production teams must treat performers as “*humans first and artists second*,” communicating openly with them and respectfully (Abate, 2022; p. 9).

4.7.3 Sub-theme B: Communication and well-being

Performers also spoke of the value of open communication between the cast and the production team during contract and its positive impact on well-being. For example, Harry explained a pathway of communication between cast and producers via his dance captain:

“Because we were being overworked with rehearsals, and our dance captain just went to the producer and went, ‘You’re going to burn out this entire company. You need to change how you’re doing this.’ And the producer just went, ‘Okay’ [and changed the schedule]”.

In Harry’s company, the dance captain felt concerned for the well-being of the cast and so approached the producer to discuss adapting the rehearsal schedule to make it more

sustainable for performers. Subsequently, the producer made changes to the schedule. Although this outcome is positive, it is concerning that rehearsal schedules were so intense that Harry's cast was approaching burnout. Harry's show had since entered the performance stage of the contract, and, at the time of the study, he scored 62.5 on personal burnout, categorising him as experiencing high burnout. Performing eight shows a week is so demanding that performers can still encounter burnout even with support plans and communication between cast and production teams. It is possible that Harry's burnout score would have been even higher if the support had not been available to him. Perhaps Harry's production could do more to make support known and encourage performers to utilise the support offered. It is also possible that stigma surrounding well-being support could be preventing performers from reaching out and accepting support on offer (Vassallo et al., 2019). Additionally, even with the alteration to the schedule, the intensity of eight shows a week might be limiting Harry from engaging with support. As Nathan, whose production offered similar support, explained, *"I was trying to book in to see our mental health team for a while, but because we had so many back-to-back rehearsals, you can't! [...] You can't actually get the time to do that."* A total number of 77 out of 105 participants in this study were categorised as experiencing high burnout, with 53.33% of participants currently in contract. With such high levels of burnout, productions and industry initiatives must do more to tackle burnout and stigma by championing communication and clear pathways to support. They also have a responsibility to ensure performers feel they have enough time and energy to access support; otherwise, having the support in place becomes more of a tick-box exercise rather than a resource that performers can utilise.

Performers also spoke of the value of open conversations regarding challenging themes in productions. Mason, for instance, described how an assistant director navigated racist themes during rehearsals:

"When rehearsing a scene where [racial language] was used, the assistant director did a wonderful job, oh my goodness, of setting up the space. Before we

were about to get up to it, he said, 'pause,' and explained to the room we would all read the script. How we need to be conscious and cognisant of different people's relationship with that word. He [pause] just really did a great job in setting, setting the atmosphere and we resumed, and I thought that was responsible."

Mason spoke of the same contract, where he was afforded respect and time during his audition. In rehearsals for Mason's show, the assistant director took time to address racist language that featured in the text, ensuring the cast were aware of it and how different people can have different "relationship[s] with that word." Mason praised the assistant director for "setting the atmosphere," which, like during the audition, made Mason feel more at ease. This builds on findings from Phase One, when Isaac said, "If the rehearsal process is dealt with correctly, then no you shouldn't [be affected by themes]." This provides evidence that with sufficient support in place, the potentially harmful impacts of difficult themes can be mitigated (Sherman et al., 2021). Therefore, difficult themes are another element of musical theatre that requires time and communication between the cast and production team to navigate effectively. Any difficult themes in a production must be addressed early during rehearsals to help performers sustain their well-being through rehearsals and into performances.

Understandably, Mason expressed disappointment when initial conversations with production teams did not materialise into well-being support during a previous contract. Mason noted the director claimed that "This is going to be different to how you've experienced other shows." He continued:

"A lot of us have experienced a lot of shows with a majority Black cast, and I've had horrible experiences. Me included in terms of well-being [pause] and treatment. And us knowing that it's been different versus it being a majority white cast. So that was one of the first things he said. And I think we're all be like, 'Oh, Okay, wonderful. It's sort of being spoken about.' But like not really. But okay. He knows that. Obviously, there was something that things that practices that were happening in the past, and now he wants to be different. It didn't happen. [As] soon as the curtain came up [pause]

for our first preview, everything went back to how it used to be. Everything. Suddenly it became only about the money. Our well-being was not looked after.”

Mason described being treated differently in a majority Black cast compared to a majority white cast. He felt let down by his production team, as they reassured the cast that *“this would be different,”* but later found that as soon as preview performances began, *“suddenly it became only about the money,”* and the cast's well-being was disregarded. For Mason, there was a great level of trust broken by the producer's actions. Mason was understandably disheartened and seemed to struggle to talk about his experience, as shown in his use of short sentences. This reiterates how well-being support can vary significantly between casts and uncovers a discrepancy between how majority white and majority Black casts can be treated by management. Mason's experience highlights the need for producers to follow through with their intentions and support performers throughout a contract. Again, it is not enough to present *“performative”* changes that do nothing to make musical theatre truly more equitable; productions must go further by addressing the past and ensuring all performers are supported and heard throughout contracts (Davis, 2024, p. 135).

Alongside communication between cast and production teams, Lucy spoke of the value of conversations between cast members when navigating difficult themes. She explained:

“The workshop stages and everything, we had really intense discussions [about difficult themes] and just all the things we spoke in such detail about them, and we were so kind of raw, raw with each other about our feelings towards them, that it kind of created this like cushion of the company, everyone felt really comfortable with each other and talking about all these things.”

Although specific themes are withheld to ensure anonymity, Lucy described the cast being *“raw with each other”* about personal and challenging topics, meaning they were candid and open about their experiences. She explained that this openness created a *“cushion”* where *“everyone felt really comfortable with each other.”* It is clear that communication is paramount

in creating safe and supportive environments for performers. This supportive atmosphere reiterates Theme 2 of this phase of the project and highlights the importance of performers creating a supportive family culture. It further emphasises that the performance of difficult themes does not inherently have to negatively impact performers' well-being and the value that performer networks can have. Facilitating a supportive environment between performers could be just as crucial for well-being as providing formal support structures.

The value of informal structures of support extends beyond discussions of difficult themes. For example, Gregory and Mason both described the importance of reaching out to those in the industry for support. Gregory explained how he speaks to his agent when dealing with rejections: *"I sometimes talk to my agent. It's good to talk to a friend who's in the industry because they'll have been through it, so they can empathise."* Even across the actor and agent roles, a sense of shared experience from working within the musical theatre industry is reassuring and helps performers like Gregory to open up and ask for support. Mason shared a similar sentiment of leaning on those close to him for support. He was thankful for therapeutic support from *"both [the] professional and the loved ones I have in my life, who are also therapeutic, some of whom were also in the industry."* The need for informal support structures is perhaps even more pertinent for parents in the industry. Isabel explained, *"I think you have to rely a lot on, again, the people immediately around you."* She continued,

"Lucky for me, I've had enough support around me that I have been able to balance both and do a bit of both but not everybody's in that situation, not everyone has got parents around them or people that are going to help them to be able to balance both."

Isabel explained that the informal support from those *"immediately around"* her has enabled her to pursue a career and be a mother. However, she emphasised that having such support is not the case for all performers. This reiterates the value of performer and parent groups in ensuring performers do not feel alone within the industry (PiPA, 2023). Isabel's reliance points to a larger issue: insufficient formal structures to support parents in the industry. It is clear that

performers across the industry value the informal structures of support in their lives; these trusted, close contacts are crucial in maintaining their well-being.

4.7.4 Sub-theme C: Pathways to support in productions

Performers frequently described how the role of the company manager can be pivotal in maintaining their well-being during a contract. James explained that when he experiences any challenges, he goes to his company manager. However, he crucially points out that *“your company manager may not be the best person at handling these kinds of things or, more importantly, is not qualified to kind of help out with these things.”* James explained how performers often go to their company manager as a first port of call for help. However, performers should be aware that those in the role are not always qualified to provide the support they need. Phase One highlighted the importance of signposting performers to support; therefore, training company managers as mental health first aiders is highly beneficial. Kenny’s experience supports this: *“I had wobbles and had to speak to the company manager, who’s a qualified therapist as well. [They were] so amazing.”* This highlights the value of those in senior roles in productions who either have a background in well-being support previously or have received mental health first aid training. Given that company managers are often performers’ first point of contact, producers should prioritise well-being training for the role. This would help ensure quick access to support when needed.

Alongside the value of formal well-being training for company managers, Olive emphasised the importance of the person in the role having interpersonal skills. She explained, *“I just, I didn’t feel like my company manager was someone I could trust and someone I could go to when I needed someone.”* Olive was not asking for extensive well-being support; she simply felt unable to trust her company manager. One of the primary responsibilities of a company manager is to liaise with performers and make sure they feel *“valued and cared for”* (Bogyo, 2017, p. 13). A trusted member of staff whom performers feel

comfortable approaching is crucial, particularly given the previous discussions of loneliness and isolation that many experience. These findings emphasise the importance of the role of the company manager in helping performers manage their well-being, with signposting and expertise if trained, as well as more fundamental pastoral support.

Another member of the support team that performers discussed was the role of the intimacy coordinator. As previously mentioned in Phase One, intimacy coordinators and directors can have a variety of responsibilities within a production, such as educating performers on knowledge of consent to boundary setting and advocating for diversity and inclusion (Lashmar, 2023). Olive described the importance of intimacy coordinators in creating a safe space for performers, something her most recent production lacked:

“So me and the character who played opposite me had to kiss twice, which is fine. That was never discussed with anyone, and it was just something we were expected to do. Now, I felt very comfortable with my co-star, and I was happy to do that, and he was too. Not everyone may be. [But...] he would get sick a lot, and then I had to go into work and kiss him, and I was like, ‘I don’t want to kiss you because you’re not well’ [...] I ended up taking it upon myself and said, ‘Okay, let’s do something else instead [pause] because I don’t feel comfortable here’ [...] And that shouldn’t have been my responsibility”

Olive’s production had no conversation or planning regarding how the performers felt about the intimate scene and what action to take if they felt uncomfortable. Olive felt it was not her responsibility to make her and her co-star comfortable with the scene. Instead, an intimacy coordinator or director should have taken on responsibility. Olive’s experience speaks to a distinct lack of communication around stage directions and highlights how the industry is fuelled by an *“expectation that the only way to succeed is by offering immediate agreement”* (Lashmar, 2023, p. 11). There was no discussion, as Olive said performing the stage kiss was *“just something we were expected to do.”*

In contrast, Dawn faced challenges when the production provided an intimacy coordinator. Dawn explained:

“Intimacy coordinators. I've only ever had to deal with one. It was horrific. It was not good at all. It made me [pause] I would much rather just the director say ‘kiss that person now’ and have that be the end of it instead of all of this palaver about ‘may I touch you here? May I touch you there?’ and it just makes things so much more awkward. I prefer it if the director wouldn't pease out and leave us alone to just to do make-out stuff out of context of all of that. Oh that's the other thing he [the intimacy coordinator] had us do an exercise where we kissed each other but he was like ‘not in character. Please do this as yourselves. I'd like you to kiss each other as yourselves.’ If the director's there then there's something kind of like it's okay. You're in character and it's all for the purpose of the scene. But if it's just like people doing make out stuff together and it's vague as to whether you're in character or not [pause] it's very uncomfortable. So [1.] I think having a director there and [2.] being the opportunity to speak your mind about how you feel about your partner very confidentially would help [...] and say, ‘I don't like this guy. Can you make this easy for me somehow?’”

Dawn's experience with an intimacy coordinator was largely negative, describing having to “deal with one” as “horrific.” She felt awkward asking for consent in such specific ways as “*may I touch you here? May I touch you there?*” It is imperative for Dawn that the director is present during rehearsals of an intimate nature, otherwise the line between character and self can blur. In fact, in Dawn's experience, she was asked to kiss her partner as herself, not in character, which makes it feel as though a boundary has been completely crossed. She also emphasised the value that confidential discussions with intimacy coordinators would have in making her feel comfortable. Dawn wanted the opportunity to explain to the intimacy coordinator that she did not feel comfortable with her onstage partner and wished they could have made the process easier for her. Dawn's experience highlights the complexity of the role

of intimacy coordinators. Although their presence can have immense value to the well-being of performers, it is clear that intimacy coordinators must build a trusted relationship with performers first, prioritise the comfort of performers, and ensure that any discussions and rehearsals of consent serve the show and the performers.

Performers explained uncertainty in accessing support in productions. James reiterated a common discrepancy between physical and psychological support that is available to performers: *“Physically it's always kind of covered, but emotionally I'm not sure [pause] unless you're proactive, or you're someone who's already going into weekly therapy or doing that kind of work on yourself.”* He described being unsure of what support is available to help performers maintain their emotional well-being, aside from private support. James continued, stating, *“I'm not confident that every performer in a production knows where to go if they're experiencing mental struggles.”* This was echoed by Aaron when he described the lack of procedure in place for managing psychological well-being in his recent production:

“When people had injuries, the immediate port of call was to get them seen by this [pause] the physio that West End performers are sent to [...] I was surprised that there was never any mention of it on a mental side, that there isn't a kind of logical pathway of ‘oh if you're struggling with the contents of this show, here's the person we're gonna send you to talk to if you would like that.’ There was no kind of plan in place for that and I'm sure if I'd pushed and kind of asked for that there may have been something but it doesn't seem as set in place as the physio side is for kind of physical issues.”

Aaron's production had a clear procedure for managing physical ailments but regretfully had no clear system for supporting performers' mental health. Aaron and James' experiences suggest a lack of awareness from some production teams of the importance of mental health in the industry. Due to the lack of readily available mental health support, performers like Aaron seem hesitant to ask for emotional well-being support. This could delay performers from accessing vital mental health support and perpetuates stigmas surrounding mental health, as it is treated so differently from physical injuries. Korte (2020) previously emphasised how

stigma and lack of knowledge are two crucial elements that stand in the way of prevention and treatment for psychological well-being. The author warned of the “*smile economy*” that exists within the arts, that “*demands one’s real feelings are suppressed while one is working*” (Korte, 2020, p.118). If performers are hesitant in the first place to ask for help, there is a danger that the industry will move further towards a smile economy, which is concerning given the prevalence of poor mental health well-being across the creative industries (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023; Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Moyle, 2012). This builds on Phase One, when experts noted the pressure for performers to appear agreeable. This highlights a need for clearer pathways of support, particularly regarding mental health.

4.7.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the musical theatre industry has a varied and unpredictable culture of well-being support. Some productions showcase a welcoming culture, where performers are treated respectfully and their well-being is supported. However, with no industry standard, a performer may be offered extensive support for their physical and psychological well-being in one production and no support in their next contract. There needs to be an industry-wide policy that demands a minimum level of well-being support for performers. It is hard to draw a line when productions are no longer responsible for the well-being of performers. Certainly, whilst employed in a production, all performers should have access to well-being support. What a performer needs to maintain their well-being in a contract can vary significantly based on factors such as role, age, and access needs. So, producers must facilitate an open dialogue with their cast to ensure everyone has the proper support available to them in order for both the cast and the show to go on. It is essential that these conversations lead to support that is not merely performative but is carried through for the duration of a contract.

This study shows a high prevalence of burnout among performers. Even with seemingly extensive support in productions, some performers still experienced high levels of burnout. There could be a persisting stigma attached to acknowledging illness and accessing

support that prevents performers from utilising available support. Moreover, the cast environment could also impact performers' confidence in accessing support. Crucial to ensuring the well-being of musical theatre performers is making pathways to accessing support visible and simple. Productions should also ensure appropriate confidentiality when performers access support, which could give some performers the confidence to reach out.

Performers emphasised the importance of open communication between casts and production teams. The key to open communication is trust, something that some performers have experienced being misused. This building of trust is pivotal to the success of the roles of company manager and intimacy coordinators. Some performers relied on informal support structures, such as family and fellow castmates. These relationships are undoubtedly crucial in sustaining well-being. However, reliance on these relationships points to a lack of formal support from productions. These findings contribute to the musical theatre performance career framework as they highlight today's industry culture and much-needed improvement areas.

4.8 Theme 6: Challenges to work-life balance

4.8.1 Introduction to Theme 6

During the semi-structured interviews, performers were asked the open-ended question, *"Could you explain whether you feel you can have a healthy work-life balance?"* Numerous performers laughed in response to the question, implying the phrase is an oxymoron in the industry. Theme 6 outlines the shared meaning across participants that sustaining a healthy work-life balance is challenging in today's industry. Some performers admitted challenges throughout their career with managing work-life balance, but time in the industry has afforded them the confidence to prioritise their well-being and say no to things. In comparison, other performers found the challenge too great and felt they must make sacrifices in order to continue pursuing a career in musical theatre.

4.8.2 Sub-theme A: A path to a healthy work-life balance?

Some performers spoke of feeling confident in saying no to things and prioritising work-life balance. For example, Olive described,

“Depending on your lifestyle, some people do just want to work. Some people are like, ‘I have a mortgage to pay,’ or ‘I have kids [...] It’s a job, I will take it.’ [...] Over the past, I’d say, seven years, my like being authentic to myself has felt more important than just saying yes, and I don’t think that was encouraged as much at drama school, though, I will say that I don’t think that harmed me. I think that was just maybe, like something that I got to discover.”

Olive, who has been in the industry for 10 years, explained learning early on in her career that “*being authentic*” to herself was more important than accepting job opportunities. Olive’s work-life balance seems sustainable, as she is confident in prioritising herself over pressure to accept job offers. Although, as Olive explained, many performers in the industry are not in the financial position to turn down job offers. Olive’s experience also speaks to a wider issue of autonomy and the pressure to say yes. Seton (2010) previously described a lack of autonomy that many acting students experience during training. He discussed the complex power dynamics in training institutions where students can feel pressure to “*submit to discipline, however painful, if it would deliver career success*” (p.6). When performers first enter the industry and are “*green*,” for some, there is a learning period that they have the right to say no to things (Smith & Eyer, 2015, p. 8). Although Olive said learning to balance work and home life did not harm her, one questions whether the journey is necessary. It could be argued that if training institutions emphasised the importance of authenticity and integrity, performers might develop a healthier work-life balance from the outset of their careers and could forgo the challenge of honing a balance over the years.

Dawn shared similar sentiments, explaining that “*especially earlier in my career, when I was in my 20s. The work-life balance was not as good, and now I feel I’ve earned the right to kind of carve that out for myself, and no one questions me on it now.*” This need to “*earn*

the right” to maintain a healthy work-life balance could be considered a toxic mindset that perpetuates hierarchical structures within casts. Ultimately, respect should not be earned, and a healthy work-life balance should be available to all performers, from green to experienced. In addition, James described feeling confident to say no to socialising, which has led him to *“have a pretty good work-life balance.”* He explained that during his last contract, he felt *“quite a lot more empowered by being like, ‘no, I’m not coming to that because I’m good. I’ve got this tomorrow, or I’m [pause] just don’t want to feel like crap. I don’t want to be tired. So I’m not coming, have fun, all of you.’”* James felt *“empowered”* to set a boundary with his peers, and he wanted to prioritise his well-being over socialising. Given that Olive, Dawn, and James had been in the industry for 10, 15 and 11 years, respectively, confidence to place importance on work-life balance is something that performers can develop over time. Performers often question their place in the industry when they have been in the industry for 10+ years, as they can tire of financial instability, particularly as many begin to encounter increased financial responsibilities, such as starting a family (Maxwell et al., 2018). While others step away from the industry during this time, those who choose to remain are forced to reevaluate their relationship with the industry, which could explain why performers like James gain newfound confidence and seek to prioritise their work-life balance more (Maxwell et al., 2018). This contributes to this study’s musical theatre performance career framework, providing evidence that developing a healthy work-life balance in a career as a performer is possible. It aligns with the themes of TSMGO, as to sustain performing eight shows a week, performers should consider the weight they give to the balance of work and life. However, despite a healthy work-life balance being possible, achieving it is difficult and can take a long time to perfect.

A much younger performer, Aaron, described having a healthy work-life balance. Unlike the other performers, Aaron attributed the ability to sustain a healthy work-life balance to the expectations of his role. As an offstage cover for a single role, he explained being able to lead a healthy work-life balance, *“Potentially, that’s because of the nature of the fact that I might more often than not I am [pause] my job is going into London, sitting in a dressing room,*

going home. I don't have the demand of performing on top of that." As expected in offstage cover roles, he resided in his dressing room for much of his contract (Elster, 2023). As Aaron said, this comes without the physical demands of performance, although there is an expectation that he is ready to perform at any time. In contrast, Aaron lacked work-life balance when performing for a scheduled performance week. Aaron made *"no plans outside of work for that week because [...] I couldn't predict how kind of up for anything outside of that I would be."* Strains on work-life balance can vary between roles and at different periods during a contract in the same role. This further contributes to the idea that though a sustainable work-life balance might seem possible, it can be incredibly difficult to maintain. Therefore, performers must monitor their work-life balance throughout a contract, as it can change at any point.

4.8.3 Sub-theme B: Sacrifice and lack of balance

Performers had varying experiences of work-life balance during long contracts. While longer contracts can offer greater financial stability and the ability to book holidays, they can also demand extensive commitment from performers, making managing work and personal lives difficult. Gregory explained that when he first accepted a long contract, he could *"book family holidays for maybe the first time in my work life."* Booking family holidays is seen as a luxury that undoubtedly impacts some performers' feelings of balance. This is surprising given that performers are categorised as self-employed for tax and National Insurance purposes but are workers for employment law, and as such, are entitled to holiday pay; even workers employed for short contracts are entitled to holiday pay (Equity, 2025). This builds on findings from Phase One, when Daphne discussed the lack of time off during contracts, as it reinforces how contract restrictions can impact performers' work-life balance.

Isabel described how long contracts impact work-life balance, both positively and negatively. She explained that,

"It's a tough one. It always is because unfortunately with the long contracts, well that

comes the money that's the fortunate side of it you get regular pay for an extended amount of time but the sacrifice is [pause] that lack of balance there with everything else you might want to do in your life"

Isabel notes that the huge benefit of long contracts is increased financial stability. This makes long contracts incredibly sought after, as the industry is widely recognised as financially challenging (Phase One, Mae; Maxwell et al., 2018; McDowall et al., 2019). However, Isabel does not shy away from the challenges of long contracts, describing the “*sacrifice*” they also demand. Isabel’s description is reminiscent of the nature of career calling, as she describes being in contract as all-consuming.

This mindset was echoed by Dawn when she said:

“When I’m in a job, work takes over. I live for the show. There probably isn’t much balance at all. I stay quiet during the day. I go to bed after the show. I drink a lot of tea. I save my voice. I live for the show.”

Dawn explained a lack of work-life balance as her job affects her behaviour in her personal life to such an extent that she “*lives for the show.*” Dawn sacrifices her personal life to feel confident in her well-being to be able to perform. This echoes findings from Fenton (2022), in which one performer described, “*When I’m in the theatre, there is no balance*” (p. 191). Unsurprisingly, this mindset is so all-consuming when in a long contract that Dawn said,

“Some people describe it as going to prison [laughs]. ‘I’m going to prison for the year. I’ve just got a nice long contract and I’ll be in prison for a year. See you on the other Side’ [...] I guess the work-life balance isn’t great when I describe it out loud, but you do it because you love it.”

Dawn was laughing when she compared her long contract to a prison sentence, which shows an awareness of the negative connotations of this comparison, such as being trapped and a form of punishment. This kind of language is reminiscent of the controversial disciplining phrases used in some training institutions (Seton, 2010). Seton (2010) spent ten weeks observing actor training classes and was shocked and “*troubled*” by the recurring language

used by an acting teacher, *"We prefer to seduce you rather than rape you"* (Seton, 2010, p. 5). Using language like this can stay with performers as they progress through the industry, as Dawn described her peers using similar language. Dawn admits that her *"work-life balance isn't great when I describe it out loud,"* but justifies it with her love for performance. This provides further insight into the nature of career calling and how willing performers can be to give their lives to their work. Dawn's experience highlights that performers might not be aware of how truly unbalanced their work-life balance is. Dawn previously described feeling like she had *"earned the right"* to a healthy work-life balance, yet in reality, she feels consumed by her job when in contract. This calls for greater awareness of the importance of sustaining a healthy work-life balance and the language used around it.

Some performers provided insight into how long touring contracts can affect performers' friendships. For example, Fern described how her friends interpreted her year-long touring contract:

"I have some friends who [when] they found out I was going on tour, they're like [pause] 'See you next year.' Because I think for some people they think just because I'm home once a week [...] they're like, 'you may as well just not even be here at all.' So I think sometimes you do feel kind of lonely"

Fern described feeling lonely as some of her friends disregarded the fact that she would be home each week during a contract and simply saw her as unavailable for the year. This reiterates the perception of year-long contracts being all-consuming. As Fern previously described the challenges of isolation on tour, it is concerning that being home during the contract did not provide a respite from loneliness.

Additionally, performers detailed the challenges of navigating family and relationships alongside work. For example, Harry explained how his schedule is not conducive to seeing his family:

"We're sleeping the morning away waking up around, 10 or 11 and then we've got to be in later on [pause] so it only gives a few hours to do stuff. And in that time you find

yourself, one, like well I need to actually make food or do that. And so there's very little time to actually spend with family."

The intense schedule that comes with a performance career leaves little time for basic personal maintenance, which compromises time to see family. In fact, the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory revealed that 32.38% of participants felt they seldom or never have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time. James shared a similar sentiment when he said,

"I was at a point, at a time in another relationship, where it was difficult to try and manage that relationship because of you being away, but then also the expectation to come back all the time, but then you might just want to actually enjoy your time there or do something on the day of the one day off you have."

Like Harry, he noted difficulty navigating his own time and time with loved ones. This was particularly challenging with limited time off on tour and being away from home. James's experience speaks to the larger issue of work-life balance for creative industry workers: the demanding hours of the arts are not *"compatible with family life"* (Brook et al., 2020, p. 238). Moreover, in a study by Musgrave (2023), professional musicians described the challenge of balancing relationships with work and likened working as a musician to having a third partner in their relationship. These findings build on Phase One, providing greater insight into performers' experiences balancing relationships with work commitments. This contributes to the musical theatre performance career framework, as it shows how challenging it can be to maintain relationships outside the industry, yet it is crucial for performers to lead a sustainable career.

Performers detailed how scheduling of rehearsals and performances can alter their balance of work and personal life. For example, Kenny detailed his experience when rehearsing a recent show:

"I've never really done that process where we do a week on, take a full week off and then go into a show. And that work-life balance was interesting, because that week

on was very intense. It was in all day, and then you don't really get much time off. And then that week off was a [pause] 'right, you're kind of on your own now.' I remember coming back to my flat in London and be like, like, 'hey, what do I do?' And that was quite difficult to, to navigate."

An intense week of rehearsals followed by a full week off was something Kenny had not experienced before. Kenny described rehearsals as "all day" without "much time off," which highlights the unsociable working hours in musical theatre (Brook et al., 2020; Eynde et al., 2016). He felt lost and unsure how to manage an abundance of free time in the week prior to commencing an intense performance schedule.

Additionally, Nathan provided insight into the intensity of performance schedules: *"Eight shows a week is intense [...] With this job, we've eight shows, and we do two on a Friday, two on a Saturday, and one on a Sunday, and then we have Monday off. So it's quite anti-social in that the most typical day off is a Sunday. Usually, you can guarantee that everyone will be off on a Sunday [pause] how do we plan to have friends? Because they will work different hours to us for at least a year."*

Nathan was frustrated by his production's performance schedule, working different hours from his loved ones outside the industry and his peers within it. With his contract lasting "at least a year," Nathan questioned how he was supposed to socialise outside work. This builds on findings from Phase One as it further highlights the intensity of rehearsal and performance schedules and how they often are incompatible with sustaining a healthy work-life balance.

In discussions of work-life balance, performers described a blurring of work and hobbies. During Phase One, Daphne explained the challenge performers are forced to navigate when their hobby becomes their work. Calvin spoke to this experience when he expressed confusion over what precisely constitutes a hobby: *"[a friend asked me] 'What hobbies do you have?' and I was like 'ummm [pause] hmm [pause] errr [pause] define hobby? What is a hobby?'"* Nathan spoke of a similar experience: *"We're in a fortunate position where we got to turn our hobby into our work. And so there's this huge sort of weird overlap where*

it's like, "Am I doing work, or am I doing a hobby?" With the blurring of hobby and work, performers are left uncertain about what constitutes either. Calvin was also unsure if his work-life balance could be considered healthy:

"I don't know, I don't know if I have a healthy life balance. For instance, today, I'm having this call with you I'm [pause] I did some stuff on the weekend, so I spent half an hour earlier creating a post for Instagram. No one's paying me today, but I am definitely working and I don't know, I don't know. I've no idea."

Calvin had "no idea" whether he had a healthy work-life balance; he attributed this, at least partially, to a lack of clear boundaries with his work. At the time of the interview, Calvin was outside of contract and thus without the intense schedule that eight shows a week demands. Marshall (2024) previously noted the complexity of the often "fluid schedule" that work in the creative industries can permit (p. 260). Performers may experience fluid schedules, particularly when between jobs. Therefore, boundaries must be established to prevent work and personal life from blurring, something individual to each performer and their home life (Marshall, 2024). These findings point to the need for greater awareness in training institutions and the industry of the importance of maintaining hobbies while pursuing a calling.

4.8.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, findings show that some performers can sustain a healthy work-life balance. Work-life balance is most sustainable when performers have the confidence and resources to prioritise their well-being and feel empowered to say no to things when needed. However, given the financial precarity of musical theatre careers, performers can feel pressure to forgo their integrity and accept work simply because it is a job. It is essential that training institutions emphasise the importance of authenticity and integrity to help performers develop better concepts of healthy work-life balance from the beginning of their careers and feel empowered from the outset to say no when a job could be too much for them. Particularly regarding socialising as a cast, the industry should make efforts to move away from any culture of peer

pressure. This could help performers feel more comfortable saying no to sustain their work-life balance.

Performers highlighted the positive and negative sides of long contracts. While long contracts can facilitate greater financial stability, performers detailed the often-all-consuming nature of long contracts. This highlights the importance of encouraging performers to monitor their work-life balance, as it can change throughout their career and even over the course of a contract. Producers should consider carefully how scheduling auditions, rehearsals, and performances could impact performers' work-life balance. Producers should consider providing well-being support from the outset, as performers detailed challenges managing their time between intense rehearsals and weeks off.

A healthy work-life balance is crucial to career longevity and links closely to career calling and TSMGO themes. Although performers may enjoy living for a show, there is a careful balance to strike, as a strong career calling can cloud performers' perceptions of a balanced life and career. It is useful for performers to consider setting boundaries between hobbies and work, particularly when out of contract, as time is often less clearly structured and defined. Despite being difficult to balance, particularly when on tour, performers should maintain relationships with partners, friends and family, given the prevalence of loneliness.

4.9 Conclusions of Phase Two

Phase Two has uncovered professional musical theatre performers' experiences of the industry today, providing further insights into findings in Phase One and building upon existing literature. Quantitative results from 105 survey respondents were presented and then interwoven into the presentation of qualitative themes from 49 responses to the optional qualitative question in the survey and 15 semi-structured interviews with performers.

Theme 1 detailed performers' experiences of career calling, demonstrating how a calling can be sustained throughout a musical theatre performance career. A key finding was

the expectation performers had for a linear career trajectory, which was met with the realities of a horizontal career. Regarding inequities in the industry, training institutions were largely shown as not preparing disabled students for the industry, with staff lacking training to support disabled students comprehensively. Career calling has proved crucial to the sustained commitment to musical theatre careers and thus forms part of this study's musical theatre performance career framework.

Building on Phase One, theme 2 provided further insights into the culture of today's industry, with some performers seeing a shift in audition processes, varied cast dynamics, and an increased emphasis on diversity and representation onstage. However, performers' experiences highlighted how representation is often tokenistic, and inequities remain, uncovering the importance of marginalised communities working in senior decision-making roles in productions. Theme 2 contributes to the musical theatre performance career framework as it calls for urgent attention to address persisting inequities within the industry, demanding inclusive casting and authorship instead of performative diversity and default whiteness.

Theme 3 highlighted the variety of physical and psychological demands performers experience throughout their careers, including fatigue, burnout and physical injury. At the beginning of a contract, performers must be provided the opportunity to communicate their needs and fully understand the demands of the role. The psychological cost of performance is exacerbated while on tour, largely due to isolation. Performers varied in how they felt regarding difficult themes, but what remains clear is the need for all performers to develop effective "*cool down*" techniques to navigate moving in and out of character. Knowledge of informal and formal support structures when outside contract was revealed as essential to maintaining well-being when outside eight shows a week schedules. Theme 3 contributes to the musical theatre performance career framework, highlighting the array of psychological and physical demands that performers navigate throughout their careers and how the same demands are experienced and managed differently by performers.

Theme 4 uncovered the presence of TSMGO narrative, showcasing both the negative and positive sides of the mantra. The importance of production teams treating performers as “*humans first and artists second*” became clear, particularly regarding ensuring sufficient cover in place to avoid emergency cover situations and putting performers’ well-being at risk (Abate, 2022; p. 9). These findings contribute to the musical theatre performance career framework, detailing the need for TSMGO to be reframed into a positive, unifying mantra.

Theme 5 details the lack of an industry-standard approach to well-being support. While some productions offer extensive well-being support that facilitates a positive environment where performers can thrive, others feature a distinct lack of physical and psychological well-being support. The importance of building trust within key roles that work with performers cannot be overstated, including the roles of company manager and intimacy coordinators. Contributing to this study’s musical theatre performance career framework findings call for well-being support to shift from a “*sticking plaster*” to proactive support offered to all performers throughout a contract, which is vital given the high prevalence of burnout in survey respondents.

The challenge performers find navigating a healthy work-life balance was presented in theme 6. A healthy work-life balance is most sustainable when performers have the confidence and resources to prioritise their well-being and feel empowered to say no to things; however, given the prevalence of financial precarity in the sector, this can feel impossible for some performers. Ensuring a careful balance between work and home life is challenging, given the intensity of career calling present in this group; thus, work-life balance contributes to this study’s musical theatre performance career framework as it underpins the boundaries that must be in place for a sustainable performance career.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

5.1 Research questions

This project's research questions were addressed from multiple perspectives through two phases of data collection, first with industry experts and then with professional musical theatre performers. What follows is an overview of findings related to each research question.

1. What are the key factors at play in performers' experience of sustaining a career in musical theatre?

Key to the sustainability of a musical theatre performer's career is navigating the concept of career calling. All performers in this study exhibited career calling, describing a love and passion for performing. They revealed challenges that performers face, managing expectations of a linear career, and the realities of rejection and periods out of work. These expectations were largely shaped by childhood aspirations and early training, which aligns with research on musicians that shows a strong calling often begins in early life (Dobrow & Heller, 2015). Navigating the transition of a performer's dream becoming their job can be challenging but alleviated through managing career expectations.

Findings in the present study contribute to research on career calling, providing evidence that musical theatre performers can experience a double-edged sword of calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Cardador & Caza, 2012; Lysova et al., 2018). Calling contributes to performers' positive experiences of the industry and is a factor in their sustained commitment to their careers, yet simultaneously puts performers at risk of exploitation by management and blurs work-life balance boundaries. With some recent research emphasising the positive outcomes of a calling, the empirical findings of the present study are vital in understanding the complex impacts of pursuing a calling (Dobrow et al., 2023). This study also

contributes to current discourse surrounding the role of organisations in employees' sense of calling and the need for performers to have autonomy over their work (Buis et al., 2024). This is particularly pertinent in an industry that is synonymous with the narrative "*the show must go on,*" as performers showed a lack of agency and experienced pressure to perform from themselves and management.

High burnout was experienced by 73% of the performers in the present study (see Chapter 4.2), contributing to research on the prevalence of burnout within the creative industries. Musical theatre performers, similar to musicians in previous landmark studies, are freelance and characterised by precarious contracts, exhaustion, and low pay (Gross & Musgrave, 2020). The high prevalence of burnout among performers is concerning and could have drastic impacts on performers' well-being and the sustainability of their careers. Well-being was considered in the present study from a combined hedonic and eudemonic perspective (González-Carrasco et al., 2019). Career calling was a central contributor to life meaning for many performers in the present study. Simultaneously, a need for a reduction in pain and burnout is key for performers' hedonic well-being, as such subjective well-being was considered from a combined hedonistic and eudemonic perspective. This study, therefore, contributes to scholarship that highlights the value of both perspectives in well-being research (González-Carrasco et al., 2019).

Casting practices affect performers' experiences of the industry and career trajectory. Performers and experts alike spoke of recent diversity initiatives as not doing enough to open the industry up to more performers, and instead, what ensues is tokenism and typecasting. Some Global Majority performers in the present study experienced management breaking their trust, promising "*things would be different.*" However, inequities remain across the industry, including in regard to pay and role opportunities. Performers encountered racial stereotypes, which can impact psychological well-being as well as the sustainability of a performer's career (Bryant & Swafford, 2024). Existing scholarship makes the case for greater representation of marginalised voices, and this study provides the supporting empirical

evidence to show how this could be meaningfully addressed at all levels in musical theatre productions (Boffone, 2019). The evidence shows that tokenistic representation does not improve access to the industry for performers from marginalised groups but suggests that more stories written by and for marginalised people could open up more role opportunities, thus contributing to the career longevity of performers with protected characteristics. Furthermore, collective action that is actively anti-racist is needed, such as decolonising musical theatre texts in productions.

Key to the sustainability of performers' careers is an awareness of toxic narratives that persist in the industry. For example, "*the show must go on*" was a difficult narrative for many performers in this study to manage, as the mantra was ingrained during training and still influenced their approach to performing later in their careers. For some performers, "*the show must go on*" is a narrative imposed upon them by management, while others saw the mantra as something to unify casts. These findings highlight the prevalence of narratives in the industry and outline the need for musical theatre scholarship to actively challenge outdated narratives. Narratives must be dismantled and reframed into mantras that the industry can use more positively to boost morale in the midst of an eight-show week, not to encourage performers to push themselves to burnout. Current research is largely hesitant to dismantle "*the show must go on*" and similar narrative, "*Yes and?...*" but these findings show a shift is needed, away from glamorising "*a culture of self-destruction*" (Kelly, 2023, p. 5). Despite the strong work identities of many performers, it is vital that performers are treated as human beings first and foremost within the industry and scholarship to help raise awareness of the importance of balance in leading a sustainable career.

A theatre industry-wide report into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic found concerns that "*many theatres are currently prioritising profit over people*" and how "*the show must go on' attitude is damaging and exclusionary*" (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2022, p. 11). The present study highlights the importance of establishing boundaries regarding well-being, providing new insights into the prevalence of burnout among professional musical

theatre performers and further emphasises the need to reframe and set boundaries regarding the mindsets that are perpetuated by the industry and held by performers (Manternach & Eggers, 2022)

Performers are subject to intense schedules and physical and emotional demands of auditions, rehearsals, and performances. Coping with these demands requires performers to develop a mindset that prioritises warm-ups and cool-downs, closely monitors well-being to prevent injuries, and utilises vocal coaches (Gaskill & Hetzel, 2017). Research has previously promoted this kind of approach for Broadway performers (Flynn, 2025) but this thesis emphasises its value for professional musical theatre performers in the UK, detailing the high expectations asked of performers. UK performers experience intense emotional and physical demands similar to their Broadway counterparts, yet receive lower pay and experience greater contract precarity (Ashton, 2021). The culmination of these factors highlights why performers, particularly parents, can feel forced to leave the industry without extensive support from family or networks; performing does not feel conducive to family life (Ashton, 2021).

Communication plays a key role in the sustainability of a musical theatre performance career. The relationship between the cast and the creative team can greatly impact performers' experiences in a contract. Those in senior positions within productions decide on the level of well-being support available and set the tone that impacts performers' experiences during contracts. Establishing an open, supportive atmosphere is paramount in challenging outdated hierarchy models, such as the *master-apprentice* model (Prior, 2012). The environment in which performers enter a contract is highly varied and unpredictable. Some productions offer extensive psychological and physical support for all performers, while others might restrict support to principal roles or offer no support. The lack of consistent support left some performers in this study feeling alone, isolated, and burnt out, which is unsustainable, aligning with research across the creative industries (Doyle, 2024; Gross & Musgrave, 2020). Thus, a lack of an industry-standard well-being approach impacts the sustainability of performers' careers.

Proper support is pivotal to leading a sustainable career for all performers, particularly those with access needs. Findings revealed the importance of production teams in initiating conversations around access and support for performers. Some performers praised the support they had received, with their access needs listened to and honoured. However, other performers in the present study felt unsure about what support could be offered and experienced a lack of understanding and engagement from production teams regarding access. This research supports recent scholarship that has noted an increased understanding of access in the industry, which is yet to be industry-wide (Fragkou & Benzie, 2025). The present study highlights that it is in the interest of the production to have healthy performers. Therefore, production teams must take responsibility to ensure that support is provided and performers are appropriately signposted.

The disabled performers in the present study all spoke of feeling unwelcome in the industry and underprepared to cope with the additional responsibilities placed upon them. There is a gap in awareness not only of the support that performers should expect to receive during training and in the industry, but also in how they can access it and lift their peers so that everyone gets the equitable support they need. This project contributes to existing research that calls for available support to be made clearer and more accessible to music students (Perkins et al., 2017). Moreover, the present findings emphasise further the importance of preparing all students to tackle inequities.

2. What factors contribute to the psychological cost of a performance career in musical theatre?

The investigations in this thesis have revealed the sheer volume of factors that performers must contend with when pursuing a career in musical theatre. While participants in this study continuously spoke of a love and deep admiration for the industry, experts and performers alike detailed a psychological cost associated with performance careers. Musical theatre

performers today are under pressure from themselves, production teams, and educators to *live for the show*. There is immense enjoyment associated with the industry, but living for the show obscures boundaries and encourages performers to overlook threats to their well-being. The dangers of becoming all-consumed by work include the risk of burnout, emotional hangover, injury, and isolation. Performers' personal and work identities can also become intertwined, making navigating rejection, periods outside contract, financial instability, survival jobs, and a healthy work-life balance challenging. The performance of difficult themes, long contracts, and touring exacerbates these psychological costs. Moreover, unsociable hours in the industry make maintaining relationships with those outside musical theatre difficult and sometimes seemingly impossible. These findings provide novel empirical evidence of the psychological cost associated with pursuing a musical theatre performance career in the UK, contributing to current discourse with a methodological approach less seen in the study of musical theatre (O'Bryan & Harrison, 2024).

Persisting stigmas also contribute to the psychological cost of a career in musical theatre. Performers in the present study felt they needed to justify their careers to non-musical theatre people in their lives, particularly when out of contract. Stigma concerning mental and physical health appears to prevent some performers from accessing available support. While the culture in productions can foster family-like bonds, some continue to perpetuate a competitive "*survival of the fittest*" narrative. These cultures of comparison contributed to feelings of imposter syndrome and anxiety.

Roles within productions, such as company managers, intimacy coordinators and access managers, can hugely impact the performers' contract experience. When those in these crucial roles are not sufficiently trained or fail to build trusting relationships with performers, this can make performers feel unsupported, lost and uncomfortable. The way casting teams interact with performers also impacts performer well-being. Recently, there has been a positive shift in some casting processes away from *cattle-call-style* auditions to ones that provide more time and care for each auditionee. However, like other positive strides in

the industry, this is by no means a universal approach, and this research highlights the continuing presence of stigmas in the performance industries today (Vassallo et al., 2019).

Within training institutions and the musical theatre industry, some continue to perpetuate a toxic narrative that performers must suffer to create art. Beliefs such as this are used to justify aggressive language and fuel undue pressure on performers. These narratives remain with performers later in their careers and impact how they approach well-being and work-life balance. Training is also pivotal to how performers enter the industry, as some develop unrealistic expectations of a linear career and are emotionally unprepared to cope with auditions and rejections. These findings support Fenton's (2022) original work, highlighting the importance of preparation for non-linear careers in musical theatre training, with further insights into how performers feel about rejection throughout their careers. With no industry-wide well-being policy, the level of support offered to performers during training and performance contracts can vary significantly, from extensive support plans to no psychological or physical support at all. With 89.52% of performers in the present study (see Chapter 2.5) attending drama school, findings highlight the responsibility training institutions have in preparing students for the realities of eight shows a week in an environment that allows them to flourish and instil mindsets that prioritise well-being.

3. How do inequities in the industry impact the experiences of performers with protected characteristics today?

Performers with protected characteristics spoke of the same love and passion for musical theatre and exhibited the same career calling as their peers. However, they also described avoidable barriers that have made their careers harder due to inequities within the industry. Following social justice movements in recent years, there have been positive changes, with some examples of diverse representation on the West End and regional theatres in the UK; however, aligning with current research, findings show a default of whiteness and a favouring of young, athletic, triple threat, non-disabled performers (Artis, 2025; Davis, 2024). Inequities

discussed by performers in this study were largely related to race, disability and parenthood. For some performers from marginalised groups, these inequities are an additional factor that contributes to the aforementioned psychological cost of performance careers in musical theatre. For example, some performers found the industry was incompatible with being a parent and with such a lack of support, described how their peers felt forced to withdraw from the industry entirely.

An overarching theme in discussions of inequities is how the industry is diverse but not inclusive. Current diversity initiatives largely fail to tackle inequities; instead, performers with protected characteristics continue to be othered. Numerous Global Majority performers described being pigeonholed and typecast into specific productions and roles, such as the *Asian shows*. Typecasting is incredibly restrictive, perpetuates stereotypes and removes creative agency that performers could otherwise bring to a role. These findings highlight the realities of stereotyping on UK musical theatre performers' experiences, contributing novel insights to research (Artis, 2025). Performers across various marginalised groups felt their presence in a cast was often tokenistic. For example, the disabled performers in this study all experienced feeling unwelcome and as though they were only present in auditions to tick a so-called "*disability box*," which not only exacts a psychological cost but also undermines their performance skills. Casting teams largely remain slow to open audition spaces to a wider variety of performers, which limits the casting pool; thus, very few disabilities are represented onstage.

Despite some positive experiences regarding accommodations of access needs in the industry (Parrott & Hale, 2025), numerous disabled performers in the present study noted their access needs were not being met, and additional responsibilities were placed on them. For example, being asked to provide choreographic and dramaturgical advice for the productions. Disabled performers may also experience a lack of provision in terms of well-being and access support, specifically regarding the allocation of covers/understudies. A lack of sufficient cover contributes to the psychological cost of performing and can hugely impact physical well-being,

as performers can feel pressure to push through and perform despite fatigue or injury. Additional challenges can be experienced on tour, as disabled performers must navigate the accessibility of new venues and often build relationships with new physiotherapists at each location.

Some of the Global Majority performers in this study spoke of broken promises from management. Production teams claimed that performers' experiences would be different this time, yet the show remained prioritised over performer well-being. Experts noted some resentment in the industry towards diversity initiatives, as the dominant group (white, middle-class, cisgender, non-disabled men) experienced greater competition for roles that would not have seen the same competition before. This resentment was not widely felt across the sample, at least not overtly, and instead, many welcomed greater representation and actively tried to promote it. This is reassuring and provides hope because the barriers that performers with protected characteristics are forced to navigate are avoidable if inequities were addressed. The persisting inequities performers spoke of emphasise that for the industry to change, all professionals must acknowledge any bias, privilege, work in solidarity with those from marginalised groups to create welcoming spaces for all, and support initiatives that highlight the value of increased representation of people from marginalised communities at all levels. These findings provide empirical evidence to support existing industry demands as *"nothing changes if you don't have representation at the top"* (Sigal in Fragkou & Benzie, 2025, p. 344).

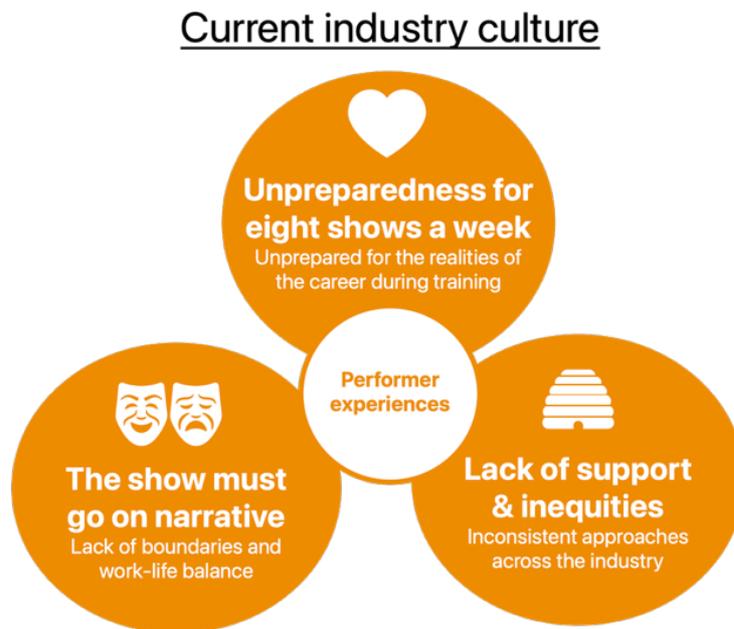
4. Where is the potential for positive change in the musical theatre industry?

"Most of it [poor well-being] is actually avoidable. There is nothing inherently harmful about musical theatre. It is all due to the toxic environment, drama, shady management, and total lack of support." Nathan- Performer, Phase Two.

Nathan encompasses a key part of this thesis's story: for many performers, the most pressing industry issues are factors outside a show's content, notably training and production cultures. Performers shed light on the "*shady management*" they have encountered, including experiencing racism, lack of support for psychological and physical well-being and a lack of awareness of access needs; calling for urgent change in these areas. However, it must be acknowledged that some industry professionals have already been pioneering change, which is reflected in performers' positive experiences of comprehensive well-being packages, addressing inequities, respect in auditions and pastoral support in productions. Performers and industry experts in the present study are united in the belief that an industry-wide standard is essential to tackle the lack of consistency in performer experience, with such variation in approach and support offered from contract to contract.

The potential for positive change can be summarised as: unpreparedness for eight shows a week, "*the show must go on*" narrative, and lack of support and inequities. These elements are conceptualised in the following diagram (see Figure 9), showing that each area contributes to performer experiences in today's industry.

Figure 9: Diagram showing the three key areas contributing to performer experiences and requiring change in the industry today



Element 1: Unpreparedness for eight shows a week

The first area performers and experts cited needing to be addressed is the discrepancy in experiences at training institutions and performers' lack of preparedness for eight shows a week. Some performers felt wholly supported and prepared for the industry by their educators, expressing deep gratitude to their teachers; however, this is not a universal experience. Reflecting on their training experiences, some performers described an unsupportive environment, calling for institutions to move away from outdated pressure cooker atmospheres where performers are treated like "workhorses." These intense, toxic environments may feel like they are exclusively in the past, yet recent graduates highlight that not all training institutions have caught up with wider society's increased awareness of mental and physical health. Some performers, for instance, described "hating" their training, experiencing a lack of support. These findings align with research that uncovered aggressive language in arts training institutions and a continued lack of awareness of the importance of performer well-being (Fenton, 2022; Seton, 2010). Performers expressed hope for all

institutions to cultivate a supportive environment that prepares students for their potential non-linear careers, educating them on the realities of eight shows a week, and empowering them to perform sustainably whilst managing well-being and injuries.

Element 2: The show must go on

The second area that performers and industry experts noted as needing change was surrounding the industry narrative, "*the show must go on*," and work-life balance boundaries. For many performers, the thrill and joy they experience from performing and pushing through fatigue so the show can go on was paramount. However, they also emphasised that knowing where the boundary is in committing to a show but maintaining well-being is difficult to determine, particularly as "*the show must go on*" is instilled in them during training. These findings provide detailed insights into the impacts of "*the show must go on*" mantra on UK musical theatre performers today, expanding on existing research highlighting the toxicity of the narrative (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2022). Performers called for production teams to take partial responsibility for performer well-being, ensuring they are not pushed to burnout and changing their priority from the show to performers' health and well-being.

Performers detailed changes needed regarding allocation of covers, with some productions not having sufficient cover in place, fuelling "*the show must go on*" culture. Disabled performers highlighted inequity surrounding cover roles, with a lack of covers provided and a failure to consider all options of who could be a suitable cover in a cast. Some current research continues to discuss "*the show must go on*" as a justifiable industry narrative and neglects to comment on how it is used and how it could be dismantled and reframed (O'Bryan & Harrison, 2024). However, industry professionals are calling for the narrative to be rethought and consider how it impacts well-being (Kelly, 2023). Some performers in the present study have reframed "*the show must go on*" as a mantra to unite casts and boost morale, a far more positive approach than the toxic narrative used by others to disguise encouraging burnout. There is a clear divide in how "*the show must go on*" is framed;

performers call for an industry-wide approach that uses the mantra positively rather than its previous and persisting toxic angle.

Performers detailed challenges in establishing and maintaining boundaries regarding work-life balance. Many performers united in calls for a two-day weekend during rehearsals to help maintain boundaries with work. The unsociable hours of the creative industries have previously been documented, but performers in the present study added discussions, detailing how their schedules can sometimes be at odds even with peers within the industry (Brook et al., 2020; Eynde et al., 2016). Nathan explained his frustration at the lack of consistency in days off in the industry and how productions can vary in performance schedules, making seeing friends even harder.

Performers and industry experts alike explained the challenge of navigating relationships outside the industry with the intensity of musical theatre schedules. For example, performers called for greater support on tour due to being physically separate from their support network. Loneliness and isolation were common on tour and something performers felt was deserving of greater attention from production teams. Performers also described not having sufficient time to spend with family, friends, and partners because of such strict schedules, something that other roles in the industry with more flexibility mitigate (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2024).

Aligning with current research and industry discussions, being a parent in the musical theatre industry brings significant challenges to work-life balance. Performers believed this challenge could be alleviated by greater understanding from production teams; for instance, from Isabel's experience, when a director is also a mother, they also benefit from scheduling that considers parenting responsibilities. Moreover, Ethan hoped for more productions to reflect on job-sharing, which would remove the pressure of eight shows a week and help parents better manage their work-life balance. Job sharing remains uncommon in the industry, and thus, more consideration from casting teams is needed (McDowall et al., 2019).

Element 3: Support, communication, and inequities

Performers encountered significant variation in the culture and dynamics of production across contracts. Some described the great sense of belonging that comes from being part of a production's family, with valued friendship circles that develop over the course of a contract. Supportive relationships also occurred within sub-groups of casts. For example, Kenny explained coming together as a team with his fellow swings. Performers noted such bonds between cast members that they encountered challenges leaving the *"tight-knit family"* at the end of contracts, calling for greater support from industry organisations in these transition periods.

Perceptions towards swings have somewhat changed primarily as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which their role was seen as invaluable to keeping shows open. Meanwhile, other production cultures remain based on hierarchical, outdated structures and operate from a *do-as-I-say* narrative with competition between cast members fuelling imposter syndrome. This approach fuels a lack of equity across productions, as ensemble and swing performers remain undervalued and underpaid despite their vital contributions to productions. This is not uncommon in the industry, as research shows freelancers across the theatre industry feel undervalued (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2023)

There were calls among industry experts and performers alike for greater acknowledgement of the challenges of difficult and traumatic themes in musical theatre. Some industry professionals argue that if the rehearsal process is dealt with *"correctly,"* allowing sufficient time and space to *"have that delineation of life"* (Gregory) between self and character, then performers can remain unaffected by difficult themes. Other performers questioned why they were not speaking to someone about the difficult themes in their productions. As a result, they sought a break from challenging themes and for their next contract to have lighter, less traumatic content. What unites these discussions is a call for greater consideration from production teams of how performers might be affected by difficult themes, the need for more precaution, and to be afforded sufficient time in rehearsals to have

separation between self and character. This contributes to industry recommendations from previous research of the importance of psychological well-being support for performers involved with difficult themes (Sherman et al., 2021).

Industry professionals spoke about the changing landscape of auditions. Some performers praised the newfound respect they have encountered in auditions, being treated with kindness and afforded more time. As mentioned, there has been a positive shift away from the machine-like *cattle-call* auditions associated with commercial musical theatre; experts questioned why auditions need as many as eight rounds and asked production teams to consider streamlining the number of rounds to limit wasting performers' time. Industry professionals have also noted a shift in awareness of language used in casting, for instance, some admitted the term triple threat is unhelpful, even though they were hesitant to use alternatives.

A significant variation exists in the level of support offered to performers in professional contracts. Daphne encapsulated this discrepancy when she said, "*There's no [pause] universal approach. There are some shows that are doing amazing things, and some that aren't.*" Some experts described how physical well-being support, such as physiotherapy, is almost always paid for; however, performers' experiences uncovered that it is not the case with some productions restricting physiotherapy to certain principal performers. Industry professionals argue that the comprehensive support packages, including access to doctors and physiotherapists, should be available in all contracts as an industry standard. Participants in this study called for emotional well-being support to be made readily available for all performers, with an increase and more effective signposting, and for all heads of department to be trained in mental health first aid. Moreover, they emphasised the need to offer well-being support proactively, as some performers were unaware of available support and how to access it. Open communication between all production areas is crucial to ensure pathways to support are clear and performers feel able to raise any issues. Communication between the cast, the dance captain, and the production team was highlighted by Harry as pivotal to the cast's well-

being, something he had not experienced prior to his current contract and hoped other productions would prioritise.

Industry professionals emphasised the importance of roles including intimacy coordinators, access managers and company managers in supporting performers, yet performers' experiences with professionals in these roles vary considerably. Some performers spoke of having to take on the responsibility of roles like intimacy coordinator when one was not provided in their production, which put them in a vulnerable position, feeling unsupported and uncomfortable. When an intimacy coordinator was provided, some found the role beneficial in creating a safe space, and others experienced the opposite, calling for more opportunities to build trusting relationships with the intimacy team and offer confidential discussions. Disabled performers described the vital role of access managers, with some praising the wonderful support they received. Some commercial musical theatre organisations are catching up with the pioneering work of subsidised theatre organisations like Graeae Theatre Company, who have accessibility on and offstage at the heart of their work (Graeae, n.d). However, some performers described encountering professionals in these roles who lack experience and expertise and called for greater consideration of the criteria needed to take on the role. This is because a lack of support can be hugely detrimental to performers' health and well-being, as performers emphasised that their access needs must be met in order for them to do their jobs safely.

One of the most pressing issues is representation and diversity within musical theatre and industry professionals were keen to see that change. Both performers and experts spoke of recent positive shifts in casting towards greater representation of performers from marginalised backgrounds. However, in some productions, recent increases in diversity have been largely performative and tokenistic. For example, Global Majority performers continue to experience typecasting, stereotypes and inequity in pay. The industry remains a relatively closed circle, with casting teams often "*playing it safe*" and casting the same performers in their shows repeatedly. Performers acknowledged the current economic climate as an

additional mounting pressure on productions, but it is not an excuse for preventing a wider diversity of performers from being cast. This contributes to research on representation in the creative industries today, providing evidence of performative diversity in musical theatre (Saha, 2024).

Some have seen a recent positive shift in the way Global Majority performers have been catered for backstage in hair and makeup. However, aligning with wider industry calls, experts hope more productions and organisations educate themselves to fully support all performers (Bectu, 2025). Some Global Majority performers praised the safe space that their productions have cultivated in the rehearsal room, taking time to discuss difficult themes and racist language, although again, this needs to be industry wide.

Participants in the present study noted the recent increased representation of disabled performers; however, visibility onstage is only the first step in addressing inequities. This study found calls for greater action to tackle the barriers that disabled performers face that their nondisabled counterparts do not have to navigate. For example, disabled performers experienced additional responsibilities, such as being asked to provide dramaturgical advice and challenges with inaccessible choreography.

Creating a safe space for all performers to thrive in the industry requires action from all industry professionals. As Bella explained in addressing barriers impacting the experiences of disabled performers: *"There are more nondisabled people than there are disabled people, so if it is only the people that it affects speaking up about it, it's never gonna change."* Thus, the changes that industry professionals seek need an industry-wide effort to come to fruition. However, an equitable future is truly possible with so many positive initial steps already taken. These findings have highlighted the current industry culture and how it impacts performer experiences.

5.2 Contribution to new knowledge

The present study's findings combine to form a novel framework outlining key considerations for leading a sustainable career in musical theatre as well as recommendations to four industry groups.

5.2.1 Framework of a musical theatre performance career

Findings from both project phases provide valuable insights into performers' experiences. The qualitative and quantitative findings consolidate into a Musical Theatre Performance Career (MTPC) framework, which conceptualises a potential industry culture consisting of balanced career calling, the show must not always go on, and equity, support, and communication. This thesis contributes to knowledge by developing a new framework for musical theatre performers working in the West End and regional theatres in the UK, highlighting related elements crucial to performers' experiences that can impact the sustainability of their careers. The framework seeks to offer a clear overview of what is required to move towards a more balanced and equitable industry, which is accessible to those in the industry as well as those in research.

Figure 10: *The framework of the present study detailing the potential of what the industry could become*



This potential industry framework (see Figure 10) presents a future that learns from today's industry, conceptualised previously in Figure 9 and builds upon existing research, particularly the work of Fenton (2022). Using Jones and DeFillippi's (1996) career competencies, Fenton (2022) developed the concept of musical theatre career capital, which outlines the *“non-linear,*

short-term contracts, geographic mobility and unique mental health concerns” of a musical theatre performance career (p. vi). The MTPC framework of this study offers a new perspective. Figure 9 presents a potential industry culture in three circles, highlighting how each element could positively contribute to performer experiences.

The justification for building a new framework rather than utilising the previous research’s framework rests on three key reasons. First, Fenton (2022) emphasised the concept of a global, boundaryless career. However, the present study’s findings did not support this, as performers touched on the boundaryless nature of their careers, but only in reference to the UK industry. Performers briefly noted moving between regional and West End work and transitioning between performance genres, but none spoke of global opportunities they had or hoped to pursue. In performer interviews in Phase Two, Broadway was mentioned only four times; three performers spoke of shows transferring from Broadway to the West End, and only one performer described a cast member leaving to perform on Broadway. An awareness that musical theatre takes place outside the two central hubs of Broadway and the West End is essential; however, given the lack of discussion by experts and performers, global knowledge is not a key component of musical theatre career capital in the UK.

Second, findings in the present study indicate a need to emphasise further well-being and the treatment of performers. Fenton (2022) noted imposter syndrome, but this study additionally highlights the physical and psychological demands experienced by performers from auditions to rehearsals and performances. Performer well-being underpins each element of the MTPC framework. For example, a balanced career calling, where a performer is aware of the realities of a performance career, can provide great life meaning, positively impacting well-being (Dobrow, 2013).

Third, as Fenton (2022) suggested for future research, this study sought to investigate the experiences of marginalised performers and the impacts of inequities. Findings revealed the large extent to which inequities exist in the industry and how they impact marginalised

performers' careers. Addressing inequities is vital; thus, it forms one of the three core elements of the MTPC framework.

5.2.2 Element 1: Career calling

The first element crucial to musical theatre performers' careers is the sense of calling that all performers in the present study exhibited. Findings from Phases One and Two highlight the prevalence of career calling across the industry and how it is possible to maintain a calling throughout a musical theatre career. Experts cited performers going after a *thrill*, which performers echoed when they described falling in love with musical theatre and exhibited a sense of urgency and need to perform. Career calling was a thread throughout four out of the six themes of Phase Two, closely linking to motivations for career pursuit, navigating demands, "*the show must go on*," and work-life balance.

For the performers in this study, career calling underpinned their love for the industry and why they continue to pursue a career in musical theatre despite rejections, outside judgments, pressures from production teams, psychological and physical demands and inequities they may face. Career calling can provide great life meaning; however, there is a danger that a calling can impact the sustainability of a musical theatre career, as performers can develop unrealistic expectations of their careers and be unprepared for a potential horizontal career trajectory (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2023; Duffy & Dik, 2013; Cinque et al., 2021; Seife, 2022). Training institutions play a crucial role in helping prepare students for the realities of the emotional and physical demands of eight shows a week and have a responsibility to ensure students are equipped beyond performance skills, including an awareness of managing finances and employability skills.

While pursuing a calling, performers must be conscious of how much their identity becomes linked to their vocation, which can become particularly challenging when facing rejection or financial precarity. Career calling can leave performers vulnerable to excessive

demands from the industry, illustrated by the high level of burnout across participants and continued commitment to their careers. This is particularly concerning for performers with protected characteristics who face additional barriers; as such, career calling could be even more pertinent. From the outset of their careers, marginalised performers are forced to work harder than the dominant group, thus testing their commitment to the industry. Therefore, an awareness of the double-edged sword of career calling is crucial for performers through monitoring how a calling impacts one's personal life and well-being, both positively and negatively. Career calling is such a pivotal aspect of musical theatre careers that it threads into the other elements of this framework.

5.2.3 Element 2: The show must not always go on

Element two of this study's framework outlines the impact of the industry narrative "*the show must go on*" on performers' careers. Several industry experts and performers shared the opinion that, post-COVID-19 pandemic and multiple crises, the meaning behind "*the show must go on*" has changed into something more positive and unifying for casts, rather than a narrative that is imposed upon performers. This shift seems primarily due to an increased awareness of performer well-being and the need for better work-life balance. However, crucially, this viewpoint is not felt by all, as many noted the narrative persisting in the industry today, describing ongoing pressures from management to perform whatever the cost might be to the cast's well-being.

"The show must go on" was ingrained into some performers during training, which has lasting implications on how they navigate their careers. These performers had a desire not to miss a single performance and pushed their bodies to their limits, relating closely to career calling and sustained commitment to searching for a thrill. Subscribing to "*the show must go on*" in this way is simply not sustainable long-term and reveals the need for an urgent reframing of industry narratives. If "*the show must go on*" is to be used, it must prioritise the well-being of performers and seek to boost morale rather than encourage burnout. Performers must be

treated as humans first and foremost, and their well-being should come before the financial concerns of a production.

Challenging the toxic use of “*the show must go on*” begins with communicating with performers, determining what is sustainable for them and their needs in a production. Performers must monitor their own well-being to avoid burnout and, if able, should consider the well-being of their castmates and raise concerns if someone in the cast is not performing sustainably. A careful balance is needed, one that manages passion to perform with a mindset that prioritises well-being and acknowledges what is required to maintain health over the course of a performance career.

5.2.4 Element 3: Support, communication, and inequities

Building trust and open communication is crucial at all stages of performers’ careers, which encapsulates element three of this framework. A supportive environment with extensive well-being support in place facilitates a space for open communication between all areas of a production. Burnout is prevalent among this group, raising concerns for performers’ psychological and physical well-being, with many in the present study unsure of the appropriate pathways to support. Therefore, clear pathways to formal and informal support structures are essential; findings particularly highlight the valuable role that company managers and intimacy coordinators play in maintaining performers’ well-being. Some productions already cultivate a supportive and trusting space with clear pathways to support, but crucially, this is not an industry-wide standard. Thus, performers currently encounter discrepancies as they enter new contracts, unsure what level of support may be offered.

Inequities discussed by performers were related mainly to race, disability, and parenthood. There are significant issues regarding typecasting and stereotyping, and a tendency towards performative diversity that culminates in an industry with a default whiteness and barriers for anyone outside this expected norm. This research has emphasised how current diversity initiatives are insufficient, and tokenistic acts of representation do nothing in

tackling inequities, which is seen in the inequity of pay within ensembles and additional responsibilities put onto disabled performers. For the industry to become truly inclusive, stereotypes within musical theatre must be actively challenged and dismantled. All industry professionals should consider their possible bias and acknowledge privilege, work in solidarity to create welcoming spaces for all, promote true colour-conscious casting and inclusive authorship. Greater funding must be allocated to Global Majority creatives, and performers should be encouraged to bring their experiences to the characters they play. Access needs must be met through conversation between access managers and performers, and access riders must be honoured. Some disabled performers praised their recent productions for accommodating their access needs and providing adequate support, but this is not the case in all productions.

This framework showcases that a potential improved industry requires a shift towards a more supportive culture with communication at its heart, during training, within casts and between casts and management. Furthermore, clearer support pathways are needed, as well as acknowledgement that challenging inequities is everyone's responsibility.

5.3 Industry recommendations

5.3.1 Introduction to industry recommendations

Over the course of the project, recommendations to improve the musical theatre industry were developed. Recommendations were generated via three strategies: recommendations made directly by performers and experts, through interpretations of findings and the framework of this study, and adaptations of existing research. Engagement with industry professionals during a knowledge exchange day in March 2025, as well as discussions with partner organisations helped ensure recommendations were actionable and relevant. Recommendations are made to four groups: performers, training institutions, production teams and industry organisations. The central concept of urgency unites all the

recommendations to move the industry forward through addressing inequities, open communication, raising awareness and reducing stigmas associated with well-being. Although the recommendations are concerned with the UK's professional musical theatre industry, many suggestions are relevant to other branches of the creative industries. Furthermore, during informal discussions with musical theatre industry professionals in the United States, many of the present study's themes resonated with their industry experiences, particularly on Broadway. Thus, this project's findings could offer valuable insights and recommendations for consideration in places globally that have similar contextual factors.

This chapter provides detailed insight into the recommendations and is accompanied by Appendix 4, which offers an overview intended to be accessible to industry professionals. Directing bespoke recommendations towards four parts of the industry highlights how improvements can only be made when action is taken in all areas of the industry. It is important to reiterate the *"perfect storm"* that currently recedes over the musical theatre and creative industries more widely. The challenging economic climate for those in the industry is no surprise, given the long history of funding cuts; however, these recommendations remain relevant and actionable. Many of the recommendations towards challenging inequities and establishing boundaries to maintain well-being are centred on changes in attitudes and approaches. Building an open, trusting environment within a production and the wider industry does not need to cost money. Moreover, the value of signposting and raising awareness of support structures can be achieved through resources that are often provided free of charge by industry well-being organisations and charities. Thus, the current challenging economic environment should not be used as an excuse for productions to overlook well-being support, but rather as a reason to ensure it is provided to all performers.

5.3.2 Part A: Recommendations to performers

Performers should consider the framework of this study to help them lead sustainable careers in the industry today. The three-element framework consists of career calling, the show must

not always go on, and support, communication, and inequities. The first element of the framework is career calling and the double-edged sword that it can come with. While a calling can foster passion for musical theatre and should be celebrated, performers should also be aware of how they might use a calling to justify impacts on their well-being and work-life balance. For example, calling can provide great life meaning and love for performing can be a powerful tool to inspire a performer on a two-show day, but overlooking burnout from a rehearsal schedule without sufficient rest is something that performers should address.

The show must not always go on relates to career calling as performers must maintain a boundary with work to protect their well-being. To avoid burnout, each performer must learn what is sustainable for them while pursuing their career by listening to their mind and body. Performers may wish to *live for the show*, but one must question how sustainable that mindset is in the long term. Moreover, a healthy work-life balance is not something that needs to be earned; it is something all performers deserve. Performers should be cautious that their pursuits of a calling do not leave them vulnerable to being taken advantage of by management. Findings in this study showed pressure from management being hidden under the guise of “*the show must go on*” and taking advantage of performers’ career calling by encouraging them to push through fatigue. Given the prevalence of burnout among performers in the present study, performers must be more aware of their well-being and monitor it more closely. Performers could action this by developing a mindset that prioritises well-being including, check ins with well-being support such as vocal coaches and mental health first aiders, utilising warm-ups and cool-downs, monitoring vocal dose, emotional and physical well-being, and injuries (Gaskill & Hetzel, 2017). Performers should consider how and when the mantra “*the show must go on*” is used; whether it is something that unifies casts or a narrative imposed upon them by management. If performers do experience the mantra in a negative way in a production, they should raise their concerns as soon as possible with well-being support professionals or a member of the production team. Performers should also be aware of the often non-linear nature of musical theatre careers and be prepared to navigate rejection and

periods of unemployment (Fenton, 2022). Maintaining hobbies and a personal identity separate from musical theatre is important; this is particularly vital during periods out of work and when pursuing survival jobs. Therefore, regular check-ins are crucial both introspectively and with performers' formal and informal support networks to monitor work-life balance, help combat loneliness and manage well-being.

During the audition process, it is also essential that performers consider how a show's content and demands might impact them. This could be through spending time preparing emotionally to navigate difficult themes or focusing on developing physical skills to be equipped to manage the role, eight shows a week. Engaging in open communication with the production team during this early stage is vital to understanding a role's demands, explaining to the team any access needs through access rider documents and how the performer feels prior to the contract. Establishing open dialogue with the production early on helps set expectations for the contract and become familiar with what support is available and how to access it. Performers should also prepare for the end of contracts, leaving the cast, and the potential emotional hangover that can come from challenging roles. They may prepare by using support from industry organisations, such as *Applause for Thought* who run initiatives to support performers who are outside contract, titled *Applause for the In-between Bit* (2025), as well as self-help tools and informal support structures. This is particularly pertinent for longer contracts as performers found their character and own identity became blurred.

Regarding accessibility, performers should communicate any access needs before commencing a contract to ensure the right support is available from the outset, including during the audition process. Throughout their careers, performers should be aware of the different pathways to access support, both regarding formal and informal structures. All performers are responsible for calling out inaccessibility and championing productions that support all performers. Some consider this to be allyship, which focuses on sustained partnership with disabled people that supports them, not speaks for them (Hadley, 2020). A performer who is an active ally would educate themselves on access and use their privilege

to call for more equitable practices, for instance, to support calls for accommodations to be made in rehearsals. More recently, scholarship has argued that solidarity is a more appropriate term than allyship, as inequities ultimately negatively impact everyone, something the shift in language recognises (Daly, 2025). As such, performers should work in solidarity with performers from marginalised groups, acknowledge any bias and privilege they may have, speak out against inequities and advocate for change, such as greater representation of all marginalised groups in all production areas. Performers should champion shows with marginalised voices at their core, question when there is a lack of representation, and challenge which stories get to be told.

Performers can play a crucial part in challenging stigmas and fostering an open and supportive industry where mental health and injuries are discussed candidly. Checking in with others can be an easy way to help ensure any well-being concerns are raised quickly. Language is powerful, and in striving to improve the industry, performers should consider the use of terms such as triple threat and how it can be seen as ableist and aggressive. Performers are just one group that, through positive steps, can contribute to a better, more inclusive industry. The role that training institutions must play is discussed next.

5.3.3 Part B: Recommendations to training institutions

One of the most significant outcomes from the present study is training institutions' responsibility in emotionally and physically preparing students for the industry. Universities and colleges must equip performers with skills beyond those of a *triple threat* because more than three essential elements are required for a career in musical theatre. For example, employability skills, adaptability to cope with varied genres and learn on the job, confidence to navigate rejection, ability to navigate portfolio careers and lead a sustainable career with a healthy work-life balance. Institutions might already be aware of these elements, but they must be made a priority to foster a better environment for students, which has lasting impacts on how they come to navigate the industry as professionals.

The experiences of performers in the present study highlight the need for a more supportive environment during training, which shifts away from unhealthy narratives like the tortured artist concept and “*the show must go on.*” The narratives instilled in performers during training have lasting effects on how they approach their careers. Positive narratives that unify casts rather than promote burnout are crucial. Numerous performers in the present study spoke of feeling overworked and unsupported during training, highlighting the need for greater support and open dialogue between students and staff regarding workload and schedules. It is also important to provide more holistic support for neurodiverse and disabled students from the outset by making auditions more accessible. Moreover, support for physical and mental health should be made available throughout training, with clear pathways for accessing the provided support. Additionally, universities and colleges should reflect on their use of language; this may involve considering what terms students feel most comfortable with in open discussions. For example, the term triple threat is exclusionary and does not describe all performers; instead, *core performance skills* is more accurate for what is being described.

Training institutions should encourage students to develop a mindset that prioritises well-being so that they can navigate intense eight-show-a-week schedules. Performers must develop effective warm-up and cool-down techniques that work for them as individuals. An awareness of the physical and psychological demands of musical theatre is crucial early on in performers' training in preparing for the industry. Performers must be encouraged to be well-rounded, prioritise balance and monitor physical and psychological well-being, including vocal dose and burnout. Performers must also have regular check-ins with vocal coaches and other well-being staff to maintain their physical and mental health. They should also empower students to know what support should be available and what to do if a production does not offer it (e.g., contact HR structures or union representatives), especially those with access needs. Educators should encourage performers to consider what integrity and authenticity look like to help them navigate challenges to their work-life balance. This crucially involves

setting boundaries between work and personal life, and could also include performers considering their values in their work and personal life, and how they interact.

Training institutions also have a role to play in tackling inequities both in their own systems and within the industry more broadly. They should educate and support staff to feel confident discussing well-being and tackling inequities. Training institutions should develop an “*anti-racist strategy*” and ensure that students have the opportunity to engage with shows by writers from marginalised groups (Shakespeare’s Globe, n.d., para. 1). Moreover, they should ask staff to acknowledge any bias and privilege they might have, and work in solidarity with marginalised groups to create welcoming spaces for all. Training institutions should take responsibility for opening up auditions to a diverse range of students. Casting in college productions should employ colour-conscious casting and consider the impacts of which stories get told.

5.3.4 Part C: Recommendations to production and creative teams

One of the key outcomes from the project's findings is the value of communication within productions. The level of communication across a production can hugely impact performers' well-being. For example, if performers feel unable to approach their dance captain or company manager about their well-being, they could risk injury or burnout. Instead, productions should be welcoming spaces where performers feel encouraged to speak openly about issues and seek early intervention. Production teams have a responsibility to set a precedent at the start of a contract regarding approach to inclusivity and open communication; working in solidarity and respect between cast and management could foster the same environment between cast members. Open communication is even more critical for performers with access needs who need to be able to tell access managers and their production teams exactly what support they need to do their jobs, preferably through an access manager. Developing an access strategy can facilitate a more accessible production for all. Moreover, having a clear pathway to

communicate with management could be even more vital when on tour, as performers in this study cited feeling more isolated and lonelier than when *in town*.

Production teams are responsible for accurately communicating the anticipated demands of a role to performers during auditions to ensure performers feel sufficiently prepared to enter an audition space, both in terms of physical demands and also the emotional demands and themes of a show. Production teams should also consider whether self-tape auditions could increase access to auditions and reduce the intensity of initial *cattle-call*-style audition rounds. Efforts should be made across productions to encourage an open and honest workplace that seeks to combat stigmatised issues, including accessing support, "*the show must go on*," and injuries and burnout. One strategy to foster this environment would be to prioritise mental health first aid training for department leads; this would help ensure performers have various available pathways to access well-being support and signposting.

Production teams should provide physical and psychological well-being support that is reliable and proactive. It is essential that this support is available for the duration of a contract, beginning in rehearsals and ending two weeks after performances have finished. This could help some performers navigate the contract ending, as they appear to be particularly vulnerable during this stage. Full cast well-being sessions can also foster a supportive atmosphere. These sessions should aim to be supportive spaces that challenge using mantras such as "*the show must go on*" in toxic ways and, instead, encourage them to be used as a unifying and positive influence.

Performers in the present study emphasised how a lack of knowledge from those in access manager and intimacy coordinator roles can hugely impact performers' experiences; therefore, individuals in these roles must be sufficiently trained to take on such vital positions. Moreover, trust is vital within these roles and must be built and sustained for the duration of a contract, highlighting the need for consistency in those in these positions and where possible, regarding funding, make these roles permanent. Related is the need for producers to consider

ways to make all stages of the casting and production processes more accessible to neurodiverse and disabled performers.

Productions have a crucial role to play in tackling inequities within the industry. Like all other industry groups, the first step is to encourage all staff members to acknowledge any privilege, bias and work in solidarity with disabled performers. Solidarity in the managerial roles within a production could involve increasing access with practical support, policy change, and establishing accommodations for breaks during rehearsals (Hadley, 2020). Production teams must open the casting pool and take responsibility for ensuring audition opportunities reach a wide range of performers from across marginalised groups. Moreover, production teams should ensure diversity at every level of a production; this is particularly true in the often-overlooked *gatekeeper* roles such as producers, who hold much of the power within productions. Due to institutional systems of oppression, production teams must build trust with performers and hold themselves accountable to promises of change.

For the industry to become more equitable, representation is essential in all production areas, especially at the senior levels of production teams. Efforts must be made to move away from typecasting and tokenism, and instead, a reparative justice framework that acknowledges and learns from past injustices should be implemented (Saha, 2024). In a production environment, this would involve developing an “*anti-racist strategy*,” decolonising language in a show, and centring stories from perspectives of Global Majority experiences rather than using whiteness as a default—steps that some theatre organisations, such as Shakespeare’s Globe, are already taking (Shakespeare’s Globe, n.d., para. 1).

Production teams must ensure that performers are treated as humans first and performers second, encouraging them to perform sustainably. For performers to lead sustainable careers, there must be sufficient support, such as ensuring enough cover is in place. For some of the disabled performers in the present study, production teams overlooked the allocation of understudies or covers, which placed unnecessary additional pressures on performers to push through burnout and perform. Casting teams should not discriminate

against parents, and productions should consider how they can better support parents and those with caring responsibilities, such as ensuring equitable policies surrounding parents, facilitating job sharing and making rehearsal schedules more accommodating where possible.

5.3.5 Part D: Recommendations to industry organisations

Industry organisations, including well-being charities and communities, are the final industry group to be addressed in this study; they play a key role in raising awareness and tackling industry issues and inequities. Industry organisations should consider hosting events or forums to allow industry professionals to share knowledge, discuss well-being in musical theatre and help build a more supportive and open industry. The knowledge exchange day associated with this project was hugely successful and resulted in calls from participants for a network to be developed, bringing together like-minded industry professionals striving for change and improvements to the industry. Given the challenges performers in the present study described when outside contract, well-being organisations have a role in supporting performers when they are not in a production. As such, organisations could consider providing workshops and support to help performers manage their well-being; these could be particularly crucial for those who lack a strong support network and new entrants to the industry.

Industry organisations have a responsibility to champion shows with greater diversity in all areas of the production and speak out against racism, ageism, ableism and sexism, all types of oppression within the industry. They should consider their role in raising awareness of inequities and the importance of making the industry accessible for both performers and audiences. For example, organisations should call for and champion funding for musical theatre writers from marginalised communities. Furthermore, they should ensure their organisations challenge stereotypes and tokenistic behaviours, taking anti-racist action and initiatives, including decolonising language in text. Within their organisations, industry companies should encourage their staff to acknowledge any privilege and bias they may have,

and work in solidarity with performers from marginalised groups to create welcoming spaces for all.

To help promote sustainable careers, industry organisations could raise awareness of the importance of work-life balance and normalise boundary setting. They should also call for industry-wide well-being and HR policy and approaches, contribute to campaigns and initiatives that call for positive change in the industry and respond to new industry pressures, engaging directly with performers to demand relevant change.

5.4 Study strengths and limitations

This study addressed its four central research questions through two phases of data collection with industry professionals and musical theatre performers. In reflecting on the limitations of the present study, a statement that I read during the first year of the project is fitting:

“Lichtheim (1885) wrote that he presented his findings despite their faults and flaws - the ones he was aware of, and the ones future researchers would find. He believed that his work was not only useful because of its findings, but because of its mistakes, and that progress in science can only be achieved in a communal effort.”

Cited by Korte (2020, p. 297)

I hope that the same is true for my research and that we acknowledge that positive change in the arts is only possible if we work together through critiquing and building upon research to achieve a more equitable industry. I now address several limitations to my work in conjunction with directions for future research.

As addressed in Chapter 2, there are always limitations regarding methodology. Although self-report questionnaires can offer valuable insights, they are not without limitations, including relying on participants' memories and honesty in answering questions (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). The strength of semi-structured interviews lies in the rich data gathered from participants who are free to discuss topics that matter to them in greater depth. Despite trying

to build rapport with each interviewee, participants may have altered their answers to fit what they anticipated the research would find. Furthermore, discussing such sensitive topics as one's career, identity and well-being directly with the researcher could be daunting, particularly when being recorded. Thus, future research could consider more confidential techniques for data collection, such as diary methods (Alamri, 2019). The study involved a multi-strategy approach; however, the primarily qualitative approach means the generalisability of findings is inherently limited. The rich data developed from engagement with experts and performers led to recommendations based on their industry experiences, which future researchers could expand upon.

During Phase Two, participants were able to take part in the study if they self-identified as a *“professional musical theatre performer.”* As some performers briefly touched on other performance contracts outside of musical theatre, it would offer an interesting perspective to consider how performing in non-musical productions could impact performers' career identities.

It is essential that participants feel comfortable with their allocated pseudonyms, so they were all given the opportunity to change their pseudonyms during the write-up stage. However, future research should consider giving the participants complete control of allocating pseudonyms to ensure they feel completely comfortable and that the name authentically represents them (Itzik & Walsh, 2023).

A primary aim of this study was to investigate the impacts of inequities on the experiences of performers with protected characteristics. It was, therefore, vital that the sample in both phases included the voices of people from marginalised backgrounds. As Phase One was treated as a pilot initial investigation, demographic data was not collected; however, this would have been beneficial in understanding the group of participants. The Phase Two survey was distributed as widely as possible to over 20 theatre organisations, 10 training institution alum networks, 25 educators, and hundreds of performers. Despite attempts to engage with a wide range of performers from different marginalised groups, the

most common ethnicity in the survey was white at 74.28%, and only 9.52% identified as having a disability. During interviews, there was greater diversity in representation, with 40% of participants being Global Majority and one-third identifying as having a disability. The engagement with experts and performers in this study has begun to uncover the inequities that performers navigate. Moreover, more detailed demographic information about class and parental status would have provided further insights. Future research should explore the experiences of performers with protected characteristics and crucially engage with performers who continue to be under-represented in musical theatre, such as plus-size performers and those with high physical access requirements (Parrott & Hale, 2025).

Despite the extensive literature on LGBTQ+ representation in musical theatre, there was no discussion of inequities specifically in reference to LGBTQ+ experience (Donovan, 2023). Performers with sexualities other than straight participated in Phase Two; however, it could be that they have not experienced any challenges regarding sexuality, or if they have, they may not have wished to discuss it. This touches on the limitation of interviewing participants on sensitive topics and points to the value of building rapport over a longer period with case study research or peer-to-peer research, which could provide the time and space for performers to speak on these topics. Furthermore, given the growing literature on issues relating to class in the creative industries, one might have expected performers to touch on class, but it was not discussed explicitly. Future research should consider the impact of inequities in the industry stemming from the so-called *class ceiling* and how class impacts performers' experiences of the industry, particularly concerning financial pressures and survival jobs (Friedman & Laurison, 2019, p. 91)

The issue of ageism in the industry was raised during Phase One but was not discussed in the data of Phase Two, likely due to the relatively young average age of survey participants, 31.54 years old. Ageism is present in wider industry calls and thus, future research could engage with older performers about their experiences of ageism and how it intersects with other characteristics (Lovell in Fragkou & Benzie, 2025). Research into how

the availability of roles for older performers impacts their career longevity would also prove insightful for musical theatre empirical studies.

Given that the project took place in the years subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is surprising that the impacts of the pandemic were only briefly touched upon by 44.83% (13 out of 29) of interview participants throughout both phases. However, across the industry, the financial implications of COVID-19 remain (Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2022). At the knowledge exchange day, conversations highlighted that for people with long-term health conditions, disabilities or those suffering from long COVID, the pandemic is ongoing, and their experiences in the industry should be explored. It is possible that the impacts of COVID-19 were less significant for the interviewees.

During Phase Two, performer Isabel spoke of hearing mothers leaving the industry, unable to navigate the industry while being a parent. Research suggests that the 10-year mark in a performer's career is often a tipping point, as they can tire of financial instability, particularly as many begin to encounter increased financial responsibilities, such as starting a family (McDowall et al., 2019). Future research could engage with performers who have left the industry to understand in more detail the factors that contributed to their decision to leave and whether inequities in the industry played a role. Furthermore, this could also lead to more research on how performers navigate retirement and manage their identities during transition periods, as previous research has considered this in relation to dancers (Harper, 2012).

The present study highlighted key factors that contribute to the experiences of performers today, but there are, of course, more factors that performers in the present study did not discuss. Experiences of intense enjoyment were explored, but future research could investigate more specifically performers' experiences of *flow state* and how it interacts with performers' career calling (Kirchner et al., 2011). For example, in recent years, much discourse has surrounded stage door etiquette and audience engagement (Applause for Thought, 2024; Smith, 2024). The performers and experts in the present study did not discuss issues

navigating audience behaviour at the stage door, but based on current industry discussions, it could be a larger factor for other performers, particularly those in leading roles.

5.5 Final thoughts

To have come from the auditorium as a lifelong lover of musical theatre to research performers' complex and multi-faceted careers has been an enriching experience. It has been a gift to interview musical theatre experts and performers and engage with musical theatre industry professionals throughout this project, many of whom love and care so deeply about the industry. While musical theatre can be beautiful, powerful, and thought-provoking, this research has lifted the curtain on the challenges performers navigate to pursue a career in the industry.

It has been a challenge to bridge the gap between evaluating the project's findings and developing recommendations. The two are so closely related that it was at times difficult to isolate the findings and not immediately leap into recommendations and present them simultaneously. Overall, I hope to have presented a contribution to academic scholarship in the under-researched area of empirical musical theatre studies, as well as engaging directly with the industry and calling for positive change.

The project has been particularly illuminating on the experiences of performers with protected characteristics and how inequities continue to form unnecessary barriers in the way of their careers. However, the measures needed to address these inequities are actionable, and industry partner organisations, participants and those involved in the project provide hope that change is possible if stakeholders at all levels of the industry take responsibility for playing their part.

5.6 Appendices

5.6.1 Appendix 1:

Industry Expert Interview Questions

Intro: You have been invited to be interviewed as part of a series of initial interviews to guide my PhD research. I am in the first year of my project, and I am seeking to gain insight into the industry and try to determine the possible factors that might be affecting performers' wellbeing. I'm also seeking to help refine the focus of my project before I come to interview professional musical theatre performers next year.

Section 1: General

1. Please, could you tell me about your background in regard to musical theatre?
 - . Your occupation
 - . How long have you been in the industry?
 - . (If appropriate) Why are you no longer involved?
 - . (If appropriate) Could you explain whether it has changed since you worked within the industry?
2. What are some of the best things about a career in musical theatre?
3. What are some of the biggest challenges facing early-career performers?
 - . Do you believe the frequency of shows has any effect on performers' wellbeing?
4. What are some of the biggest challenges facing late-career performers?
 - . Could you explain whether you believe these are unique to musical theatre performers? (Robb et al. 2018)

Roles & Material

5. Could you explain whether you believe there are perceptions within the industry regarding roles within a cast? (Swing, understudy, ensemble, lead)
 - . Could you explain whether you believe these perceptions affect performers' wellbeing?
6. Do you believe the themes present in a musical theatre (MT) show have any effect on the musical theatre performer? If so why?
 - . For example, the musical *Dear Evan Hansen* deals with teenage suicide, *Waitress the Musical* domestic violence, and *Les Miserable* Suicide.
7. Could you explain whether you believe character performance in MT has any effects on performers' wellbeing?

Identity

8. Could you explain whether you believe coming from a minority group affects musical theatre performers' experiences in the industry?
 - . Auditions?
 - . Rehearsals?
 - . Performances?
 - . (If not already made clear) May I ask if you describe yourself as someone from a minority group such as ethnicity (ethnic minority), race (racial minority), religion (a religious minority), sexual orientation (sexual minority), or disability?
9. Another pressure on performers could be the need for multiple sources of income from jobs outside the industry. You might know this as survival jobs. Could you

explain whether you think survival jobs have any effect on personal and work identity for performers and/or performers' wellbeing

Wellbeing Support

10. Could you explain whether you believe current musical theatre performers have a healthy work-life balance?
 - . What could be done to improve this (if needed)?
 - . Does this change depending on their role within the show?
 - . Does this change if the show is a touring company?
11. What kind of support/ if any do you believe performers have from the industry regarding their physiological and physical wellbeing? (Fenton, 2022)
 - . Warm-up, cool downs physically and emotionally?
 - . Does this vary depending on the show and whether it is touring or static?
 - . What kind of support should performers receive?
 - . Have you encountered mentoring relationships in the industry? (Fenton, 2022)
 - . These could be informal, or more structured.
12. How would you describe the culture among the cast of an MT show?
 - . What are the interactions like between roles? (Swing, understudy, ensemble, lead)
 - . Family?
 - . Supportive vs competitive
 - . Do the relationships between performers and production teams affect performers' wellbeing?
 - . Positive vs negative way? Children, adults relationship or equal?
13. Is there anything you think we should have covered but haven't yet?

5.6.2 Appendix 2:

Musical Theatre Performer Survey

Career Identities & Well-being of Musical Theatre Performers

Thank you for considering completing the survey! This short questionnaire forms part of a PhD project investigating the well-being and career identities of professional musical theatre performers in the UK. It should take approx 10 minutes to complete.

A key outcome of the project is to make recommendations, alongside industry partners, to incite change within the industry and improve the lives of performers.

* Indicates required question

Information and consent

Questions 1-7

If you feel distressed and wish to seek help, here are some useful contacts:

General:

Mind- <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Samaritans- <https://www.samaritans.org/>

NHS advice- www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters

Musical theatre specific:

Performing arts medicine- <https://www.bapam.org.uk/whatbapamcandoforyou/>

Help musicians- www.helpmusicians.org.uk

Applause for Thought- <https://applauseforthought.com/resources/>

Artist Well-being- <https://www.artistwellbeing.co.uk/individual-support>

Demographics (Part 1 of 6)

What follows are a few questions about you.

8. What is your age? (In years) *

9. What is your gender? *

Mark only one oval.

- Male
- Female
- Non binary
- Prefer not to say
- Other: _____

10. Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation? *

Mark only one oval.

- Straight/ Heterosexual
- Gay/ Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Prefer not to say
- Other: _____

11. Do you identify as a person with a disability? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say
- Other: _____

12. Which country do you live in? *

Mark only one oval.

- England
- Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland
- Other: _____

13. Which ethnicity best describes you? *

Mark only one oval.

- Asian and Asian British
- Black, Black British or Caribbean or African background
- Mixed or Multiple background
- White
- Prefer not to say
- Other: _____

14. Which best describes your musical theatre training? (Can select multiple) *

Tick all that apply.

- No formal training
- Training during childhood/ adolescence
- Attended drama school for undergraduate
- Attended drama school for postgraduate
- Other: _____

Your current well-being (Part 2 of 6)

Please rate the following statements based on how you have felt over the past two weeks.
Please be open and honest in your responses.

15. In the past two weeks... *

Mark only one oval per row.

	All of the time	Most of the time	More than half the time	Less than half the time	Some of the time	At no time
I have felt cheerful in good spirits.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have felt calm and relaxed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have felt active and vigorous.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I woke up feeling fresh and rested.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My daily life has been filled with things that interest me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. Are you currently in contract? (Rehearsals or performances of a musical theatre show) *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes Skip to question 23
- No

Your last contract

17. When were you last in contract? *

Mark only one oval.

- Within the last month
- Within the last 6 months
- Within the last year
- Over a year ago
- Other: _____

18. Which best describes your role in your most recent show? *

Tick all that apply.

- Ensemble
- Swing
- Understudy
- Standby
- Dance captain
- Lead
- Other: _____

19. Was it a musical theatre production? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

Other: _____

20. Which best describes the production? *

Mark only one oval.

In town (West End or Off West End)

Static Regional Theatre

Touring

Other: _____

21. Are you currently auditioning? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

Other: _____

22. What is your main source of income currently? *

Mark only one oval.

- Backstage work
- Creative work within the the industry (i.e. performing outside MT, directing, choreographing, casting)
- Creative work outside the industry (i.e. teaching, performing)
- Non-creative work within the industry (i.e. front of house)
- Non-creative work outside the industry (i.e. bar work, waiter, barista)
- Other: _____

Skip to question 29

Current contract

23. Is your current contract in a musical theatre production? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

24. Which best describes the production? *

Mark only one oval.

- In town (West End or Off West End)
- Static Regional Theatre
- Touring
- Other: _____

25. Which best describes your role in your current show? *

Tick all that apply.

- Ensemble
- Swing
- Understudy
- Standby
- Dance captain
- Lead
- Other: _____

26. Are you currently auditioning alongside? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

27. Is performing in musical theatre currently your main source of income? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes *Skip to question 29*
- No

Additional work

28. Which best describes your additional work? *

Mark only one oval.

- Backstage work
- Creative work within the the industry (i.e, directing, choreographing, casting)
- Creative work outside the industry (i.e, teaching, performing)
- Non-creative work within the industry (i.e. front of house)
- Non-creative work outside the industry (i.e, bar work, waiter, barista)
- Other: _____

Performer identity (Part 4 of 6)

29. Which term do you identify with most? *

Mark only one oval.

- Triple threat
- Performer
- Dancer
- Singer
- Actor
- Other: _____

30. How many years have you been a musical theatre performer? *

Questions about your current well-being (Part 5 of 6)

Below are statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the scale below, select the point from lowest to highest that you feel best describes how you feel. Please be open and honest in your responses.

31. *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1- Strongly disagree	2- Disagree	3- Slightly disagree	4- Neither agree or disagree	5- Slightly agree	6- Agree	7- Strongly agree
In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The conditions of my life are excellent.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am satisfied with my life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
So far I have got the important things I want in life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Questions about your well-being (Part 6 of 6)

Please rate the following statements based on how you have felt over the past 2 weeks.
Please be open and honest in your responses.

32. *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom (Rarely)	Never/ almost never
How often do you feel tired?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often are you physically exhausted?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often are you emotionally exhausted?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often do you think "I can't take it anymore"?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often do you feel worn out?	<input type="radio"/>				
How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?	<input type="radio"/>				

33. *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never/ almost never
Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?	<input type="radio"/>				
Are you exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work?	<input type="radio"/>				
Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?	<input type="radio"/>				
Do you have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time?	<input type="radio"/>				

34. Please rate the following in terms of your work in musical theatre (auditions, rehearsals and performances) *

Mark only one oval per row.

	To a very high degree	To a high degree	Somewhat	To a low degree	To a very low degree
Is your work emotionally exhausting?	<input type="radio"/>				
Does your work frustrate you?	<input type="radio"/>				
Do you feel burnt out because of your work?	<input type="radio"/>				

35. If you would like to add a few words to explain your answer above, please write them in the box below

If you feel distressed and wish to seek help, here are some useful contacts:

General:

Mind- <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Samaritans- <https://www.samaritans.org/>

NHS advice- www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters

Musical theatre specific:

Performing arts medicine- <https://www.bapam.org.uk/whatbapamcandooryou/>

Help musicians- www.helpmusicians.org.uk

Applause for Thought- <https://applauseforthought.com/resources/>

Artist Well-being- <https://www.artistwellbeing.co.uk/individual-support>

Debrief

Thank you so much for completing this survey.

We would now like to invite you to be part of a follow-up interview. This is a chance to elaborate more on your experiences, which would be highly beneficial for the project. If you wish to volunteer, please complete the following, you will be contacted to arrange an interview shortly. If you do not wish to volunteer, simply leave the box blank and click submit.

36. Please enter your name if you wish to be contacted for follow-up interview

37. Please enter your email address to be contacted for a follow-up interview

5.6.3 Appendix 3:

Musical Theatre Performer Interview Questions

Intro: You have been invited to be interviewed as part of a series of interviews to research the experiences of professional musical theatre performers in the UK. This research is part of a PhD project investigating the wellbeing of musical theatre performers and what it is like to pursue a career in the industry today.

Before we start, it is important to remember that your name will be put under a pseudonym. So will any other people or shows that you mention. Please be as open and honest as you can be. Do you have any questions?

Section 1: Early career and now

1. May I ask why you chose to pursue a career in musical theatre?
2. With [level of training], could you explain whether you feel you were physically and emotionally prepared for the industry?

Section 2: Recent/ current role

3. So you mentioned that you are [currently in contract/ not currently in contract] could you tell me how you have found your most recent/ current role starting with the audition process?
 - . What was the audition process like?
 - . What were rehearsals like?
 - . What are performances like?
 - . Were/are there any emotional/ physical demands?
4. Following on, how has this experience been different to other roles you have played?

Section 3: Roles and material

5. Could you explain whether themes in a musical theatre show have any effect on you?
 - . For example, the musical *Dear Evan Hansen* deals with teenage suicide, *Waitress the Musical* domestic violence, and *Les Miserable* Suicide.
6. Have you ever experienced not being able to “shake off” a character?
 - . Why do you think you did/ didn’t experience this?
 - . Do you have any warm-up or cool-down techniques?

Section 5: Representation (intro i’d like to talk about casting practices)

7. To what extent have casting practices changed within the industry in recent years?
 - . Have you seen a shift in the industry with regard to casting brackets?
 - . Are there ways in which social media has played a role?
8. Could you explain whether you believe coming from a marginalised group affects musical theatre performers’ experiences within the industry?
 - . Roles available?

- . Interactions with creatives teams?

Section 6: Current well-being

9. Thinking over your career when have you felt happiest? When have you enjoyed your job most? Positive experience factors
10. When the job is harder. What are the things that make it difficult and what do you do to cope with that?
 - . Could you expand on this you said you have found in challenging at the moment navigating audition proces/rejections in the survey when asked for more? be very sensitive with this
11. Could you explain whether you feel you can have a healthy work/life balance?
 - . Does this change on tour?
 - . Could you expand a little on how you said you have [level of] time and energy for family and friends?
 - . Experience of survival jobs? And your experience within the industry?

Section 8: Well-being support

12. How would you describe the culture among your current or most recent cast in a musical theatre show?
 - . Have you ever encountered mentoring relationships?
 - . Could you explain whether you have ever experienced egos within the industry?
13. What support for your well-being have you been offered?
 - . Have you taken up any of this support?
 - . Do you make use of informal support structures more?
 - . Does this change physical/ psychological?
14. What kind of support do you think should be available?
 - . Where do you think the industry should go/ want next?
 - . To what extent does 'the show must go on' persist, is it assumed *change this

Additional

14. Is there anything we haven't touched on today that you would like to speak about?

5.6.4 Appendix 4:

Recommendations for the musical theatre industry

This document outlines recommendations to improve the lives of performers in the musical theatre industry. It is aimed at **performers, training institutions, production teams & industry professionals/ organisations.**

Recommendations are based on findings from a PhD project that involved interviews with 14 industry experts, 15 performers, a survey of 105 performers and knowledge exchange with industry professionals.

Emma Risley PhD Candidate

Musical Theatre Industry Recommendations

for performers

Career calling

Consider the **double-edged sword** that can come from pursuing a **calling** and a **desire to perform**. While following your dreams can provide great life meaning, ensure that you are prepared for a potentially **non-linear** career and consider how you will navigate **rejection**.

Well-being responsibility

73% of performers in this study were experiencing **high burnout**. Develop a **mindset** that **prioritises well-being**, including warm-ups, cool-downs and monitors vocal dose. Before commencing a contract, consider how the **themes** in the show might **impact you**. You may want to **live for the show**, but check in with yourself and ask what is **sustainable** for you.

Setting boundaries

Pursuing a calling can sometimes **blur** the lines between **personal** and **work identities**. Set boundaries to maintain a **healthy work-life balance**, allocating sufficient time for hobbies, socialising, rest and other responsibilities; this is particularly **crucial** on **tour**. Try to maintain a strong **support network** with family and friends outside of your contract.

Accessing support

Communicate any **access needs** you have at the start of a contract. Familiarise yourself with **well-being support pathways** in and outside contract. This may include formal and informal **support structures**, such as **industry well-being organisations** and also **family** and **friends**.

Challenge inequities

Acknowledge any **bias** and **privilege** and work in **solidarity** with performers from marginalised groups. Challenge why a story is being told, and champion shows with marginalised voices at their core. Speak out against inequities and **advocate** for change, such as more **equitable support** and greater accessibility.

Challenge stigmas

Challenge stigmas around well-being, including being more **open** about **mental health** and **injuries**. **Challenge** the competitive, **triple-threat** narrative and instead **advocate** for an inclusive atmosphere where cast members feel **safe** to speak openly and **support** each other. **Check-in** with others and raise any well-being concerns as soon as possible.

Musical Theatre Industry Recommendations

for training institutions

Preparation for the industry

Empower students to feel **emotionally** and **physically prepared** for the industry. Equip students with performance skills that give them the confidence to learn new styles on the job. Open up **discussions** around **inequities** and educate performers that **challenging inequities is everyone's responsibility**.

Employability skills

Training institutions should ensure performers are **equipped** with skills outside core performance, including **coping** with **rejection** and the realities of **navigating a non-linear** and portfolio career.

Supportive environment

Strive to create a supportive environment that **shifts** away from narratives like the **tortured artist**. Better support neurodiverse and disabled students from the outset by making auditions more **accessible**. **Support** for physical and mental health throughout **training**.

Reflect on language

Consider how language is used and how it impacts students; for instance, **triple-threat** can be **exclusionary** and **ableist**. **Reframe** mantras such as **The Show Must Go On** into narratives that **unify** performers rather than put them under more pressure.

Well-being support

Encourage students to develop a **mindset** that **prioritises well-being**, work-life balance, monitors vocal dose and burnout. Empower students to **know** what **support** should be **available** and what to do if a production does not offer it, especially those with **access needs**.

Challenge inequities

Develop an **access** and an **anti-racist strategy**. **Educate** and support staff to feel confident discussing well-being and tackling **inequities**. Ask staff to acknowledge any **bias** and **privilege** they might have. Take responsibility for **opening up auditions** to a diverse range of students. Employ **colour-conscious** casting in college productions and question which stories are being told.

Musical Theatre Industry Recommendations

for production teams

Importance of communication

Establish [open communication](#) with performers from the outset of a contract, discussing [expected demands](#) of a role and how to [access](#) available [support](#). Work in [solidarity](#) with performers from marginalised groups, creating an inclusive space to raise any concerns or [well-being challenges](#) and discuss [access needs](#).

Casting and representation

Ensure [audition](#) opportunities [reach](#) a [diverse](#) range of performers. Challenge stereotypes and implement [colour-conscious](#) casting, encouraging performers to infuse their identities into the characters they play. Develop an [access](#) and an [anti-racist strategy](#) including centring stories from perspectives of Global Majority experiences.

Well-being support

Provide reliable and proactive [physical](#) and [psychological well-being](#) support for at least the duration of a contract. Value intimacy coordinators and access consultants. Prioritise [mental health first aid training](#) for department heads. Facilitate full cast well-being sessions to foster a supportive atmosphere. Emphasise the [value](#) of utilising [formal](#) and [informal support](#) structures.

Equitable support

Consider ways to make all stages of casting and production processes more [accessible](#) to [neurodiverse](#) and [disabled](#) performers. Ensure [support](#) is [equitable](#) and all performers feel comfortable and able to do their jobs. Ensure [well-being resources](#) are [signposted](#) and accessible.

Challenge inequities

Ask staff to [acknowledge](#) any [bias](#) and [privilege](#) they might have. Consider why a story is being told. Promote greater [representation](#) of [marginalised](#) groups in senior [gatekeeper](#) roles and ensure no additional responsibilities are forced onto performers with protected characteristics.

The Show Must Not Always Go On

Ensure [sufficient cover](#) and insurance are in place. Reframe mantras such as The Show Must Go On into [narratives](#) that [unify](#) performers rather than put them under pressure. Encourage [early intervention](#) to prevent burnout and worsening injuries.

Musical Theatre Industry Recommendations

for professionals/
organisations

Awareness of access

Embed access in all areas of work and raise awareness of the importance of making the industry accessible to performers as well as audiences.

Industry networks

Host events and discussion forums to facilitate the opportunity to exchange knowledge and discuss well-being in the industry. Help build a more supportive and open industry.

Setting boundaries

Raise awareness of the importance of work-life balance, normalise boundary setting, talking about mental and physical health, inequities and asking for help.

Signposting support

Signpost pathways to well-being support, particularly for performers who are outside contract, new entrants to the industry who did not attend drama school and to performers from marginalised groups.

Challenge inequities

Acknowledge any bias and privilege you have. Develop an access and an anti-racist strategy, including centring Global Majority voices. Speak out against inequities and advocate for change, including more equitable support, greater accessibility and more representation of marginalised groups at all levels of productions.

Industry-wide policy

Call for industry-wide well-being and HR policy and approaches. Contribute to campaigns and initiatives that call for positive change in the industry. Respond to new industry pressures, engaging directly with performers to demand relevant change.

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