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## **Bodies of work - the storytelling art of professional wrestling**

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**Bodies of Work: The Storytelling Art of Independent Professional Wrestling**

**by**

**Sam West**

**Doctoral Thesis**

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements**

**for the award of**

**Doctor of Philosophy Loughborough University**

**June 2023**

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# BODIES OF WORK

THE STORYTELLING ART OF  
PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

SAM WEST



## SUMMARY

Following the first commercial live wrestling event my company ran, a fan commented: 'Wrestling is stupid. Long live Wrestling Resurgence.' It was a flippant remark, I doubt they remember making it, and I am sure they would be surprised to learn how those words have stuck with me. Wrestling is stupid, often embarrassingly so, but it is also very clever and very popular. Despite being an artform that is much maligned and marginalised, it requires great skill, drama and athleticism. Critical, always, is storytelling. Wrestlers have backstories. Independent wrestling promotions are 'storyworlds'. Matches tell stories in the wrestling ring. These stories are not the work of a single author, they are co-created, by wrestlers, promoters and fans.

This thesis is an exploration of this unusual storytelling art. It shifts attention away from the cultural and economic dominance of global mainstream wrestling companies, such as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), and instead, focuses on the grassroots, independent subgenre, active in the UK. The research stems from my own life-long connection to the artform as a fan, a promoter and a scholar. Central is the question, how does wrestling tell stories? Chapter One establishes the parameters for understanding wrestling as a narrative artform and why storytelling is a useful lens for examining it. Chapter Two explores how this artform is the result of over a century of history, with threads running back further through the histories of popular theatre and sport. Building on this, the remaining three chapters take an unprecedented deep dive into key aspects of wrestling storytelling. These chapters focus on the wrestlers, the matches they create and the people that present this to the audience. The overarching argument here is for a new way of understanding wrestling work as a distinct creative practice, which, through the activity of a new progressive generation of athletes and artists, is resisting problematic aspects of the genres past.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

To say that a PhD is a labour of love is no doubt cliché. It is, but in this case, it is also true. Wrestling is a labour of love for those that perform it, produce it, watch it and write about it. It is also a labour for those unfortunate enough to know someone who loves wrestling. So, in submitting this work, I offer the following acknowledgements to those that love wrestling and those that have enthusiastically endured it for the last three, five, thirty years.

I am privileged to have been supported throughout this process by a dream tag team of supervisors in Claire Warden and Michael Wilson. I feel very privileged to have worked with you on this project. Mike, a non-wrestling aficionado, has been key to understanding why wrestling matters to people other than those involved in the artform, especially in terms of storytelling. Without Claire, this project simply would not have happened, which I think just about captures her importance to this work. Central to my research has been Wrestling Resurgence, which I run together with my colleague and friend John Kirby. So, it is only fitting to acknowledge the Wrestling Resurgence family, John, Pete and all the wrestlers and talented people we have worked with. Running these events filled my head so full of ideas that it required approximately eighty thousand words to empty it.

To my wife Emma, thank you for your support and patience and for never questioning my reckless abandonment of a reasonably paid and relatively secure job in favour of pursuing wrestling. To my Mum and Dad, thank you also for giving me the confidence to pursue my dreams and putting up with my wrestling obsession longer than anyone. Finally, to my son Rex, who was born just at the end of this undertaking. If you have a dream, no matter how stupid it is, know that I will support you fully in its pursuit. Even if that dream is wrestling.

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# GLOSSARY

The following glossary explains certain key terms and concepts. This is not intended to be exhaustive. Less pivotal terminology is explained within the thesis, typically using footnotes.

## **Work (including working, workers, work-rate)**

A full interpretation of 'work' occurs in Chapter One. In simple terms, 'work' is used by people in the wrestling industry to describe how wrestling is fixed, and therefore not a competitive sport. It is also extended in several ways, such as how wrestlers commonly refer to each other as 'workers' for example. 'Work-rate', relating to the wider concept of 'work', refers to how many wrestling moves, are included in a match. It can also include the tempo, as in the speed that moves are sequenced together. Independent matches are often denser in moves and happen at a faster tempo than in say WWE.

## **Shoot**

Often deployed in relation to 'work', 'shoot' is a term used to refer to aspects of wrestling storytelling deemed to be real. Historically for example, real fights were called 'shoots' and wrestlers who were capable of really fighting (if required) were called 'shooters'. Modern wrestling also gives us the concept of the 'worked shoot', which is an act of storytelling that deliberately seeks to pass itself off as a 'shoot' but is a 'work'. An example of a famous 'worked shoot' is CM Punk's infamous 2011 WWE 'Pipe Bomb' promo, which had both fans and workers questioning if it was real or a clever act of storytelling.

## **Kayfabe**

'Kayfabe', defined more definitively as the thesis progresses, is a complex term originating in the carnivals and fairgrounds of North America. In wrestling it is broadly used to describe the pretence that the sporting aspects are real. 'Kayfabe' is maintained throughout the event through the 'work' of storytelling by the wrestlers, the referees, the commentators and for the most part the audience.

## **Spot**

'Spot' is a term used to denote a kind of storytelling set-piece. It could be a move, a sequence of moves, or it could be a gesture or a physical joke. 'Spots' are generally repeatable acts, tried and tested for their effectiveness. A spot could be a bespoke action created by an individual wrestler, or something long established in wrestling history. An obvious example is the commentators table in World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) – this structure, always at ringside, is frequently gimmicked so that it will collapse upon impact. Therefore, a classic spot in WWE is for one or more wrestlers to be driven, slammed, or crash through it.

## **Gimmick and Gimmicked**

'Gimmick' is a kind of wrestling shorthand denoting a broad amalgam of character, persona, fakery, parody, tropes and stereotyping. It is also used less frequently, typically by wrestlers, to refer to something being rigged, fixed or 'worked', like for example a table tampered with to make it easier to break – a 'gimmicked' table.

## **Selling**

Selling refers to pain, both actual pain endured while wrestling and the performance of pain, as directed toward the audience during a wrestling match. The wrestler will 'sell' the effect of attacks, holds and moves to the audience, rendering them meaningful. For example, a wrestler might apply a power slam, driving the body of their opponent, back first, onto the ring canvas. The wrestler being attacked will then dramatically sell the impact and pain to the audience.

This term is unpacked in detail during Chapter Five.

## **Shine and Heat**

The 'Shine' is the part of the story where the good guy shows off their skills, the moment for them to *shine* in front of the audience. Most wrestlers will have repeatable elements to their shine, such as certain moves, sequences and spots. 'Heat' refers to purposely pursuing or cultivating the anger of

the audience. To get 'heat' is to garner in-diegesis hatred. However, connected to this are several related concepts. There is 'cheap heat', for example a wrestler making cliched derogatory remarks about the place where the show is taking place as an easy way to get heat but one that risks seeming too inauthentic. Then there is also 'go away heat', which refers to wrestlers getting genuine heat from the audience. For example, they are so bad a performer that the audience just want them to go away, and thus the 'heat' is authentic (this is also known as *X-Pac heat* after a wrestler who was said to epitomise the expression).

### **Babyface and Heel**

Wrestling has two important terms for hero and villain characters. In the UK, these were 'blue eyes' and 'villains', however the US terms 'babyface' and 'heel' are now more commonly used.

Related to the term 'spot', is the 'hope spot'. Wrestling storytelling lore posits that the audience must never fully believe all hope is lost, and therefore 'hope spots' are always included in even the most intense heat sections. They are the moments where the babyface reminds us that not all is lost, that they still have some fight left in them.

### **Botch**

A 'botch' is a miscue or mishap which often leads to a blown spot, a moment where the match performance visibly falls apart. For a time, it was common for the audience to respond to an obvious 'botch' with the chant 'you fucked up'. Thankfully, today's independent audiences are for the most part more forgiving. There are multiple YouTube channels dedicated to documenting famous 'botches', such as Botch-a-Mania. Hopefully this thesis does not spawn a scholarly equivalent, but also, maybe it should.

### **Card**

The 'card' is the term used for the running order of the show, the main event being the top of the card. Historically, the card order denotes significant ranging from least important at the bottom to

most important at the top, though this convention is not practiced everywhere, and there is great variation in terms of how cards are ordered.

## FORWARD

For as long as I can recall, art and wrestling have been a part of my life. I have been a fan of wrestling since I was four years old. It was around that time, that I also became aware of the importance of art. While wrestling was something I discovered on television, VHS and in toy stores, art was something my granddad, an amateur artist, encouraged me to pursue. Art was pushed, while wrestling was assumed to be something I would grow out of. Surprisingly, I think perhaps the opposite was true.

Several years later, I began my career in the arts, first as a gallery attendant with ambitions to become a curator. Fresh out of art school, where I graduated in fine art practice, I was susceptible to the influence of other professionals in this space. During a walkthrough of a new exhibition the gallery director said of the artists a few things that have stuck with me ever since. They declared, for example, how the artist in the exhibition was 'very serious about not being serious'. I have thought about that a lot during the writing of this thesis. The idea of being both serious and not, captures how I see wrestling as a storytelling art, and why it fascinates me. Wrestling is very serious (it's hard to do, involves great risk and does real harm to those that take part in it) but it absolutely should not be taken too seriously. Wrestling is inherently comedic, absurd and playful. The goal of this thesis is the exploration of wrestling as a storytelling art. That this work is serious, but at times also playful, reflects how I think about wrestling and how I understand its cultural significance. If wrestling stops being fun, then it stops being wrestling.

Several important shifts occurred over the course of my research that stopped wrestling being fun and made me take it very seriously. COVID-19 was the most all-encompassing, bringing all live performance in the UK and beyond to a standstill. COVID-19 had a major impact on the lives of those invested in the wrestling industry, including wrestlers, promoters and fans. The focus of this thesis is

the study of independent wrestling as primarily a live event, witnessed in person at shows rather than mediated through film. Therefore, not being able to be in the space where wrestling was occurring had significant ramifications. Stemming from COVID-19, the British Wrestling scene went through a much-needed, though extremely difficult, moment of revelation. This began with the public disclosure of widespread sexual, physical and emotional abuse, and bullying, that predominantly but not exclusively affected young women wrestlers and was perpetrated by older male wrestlers. The sharing of stories of abuse became the Speaking Out movement (Speaking Out). Within the space created by cancelled shows, victims began sharing accounts of sexual harassment and bullying. This abuse took place at shows, in training schools and in social spaces connected to the industry. Online abuse, such as through social media, was particularly prevalent. The exposure of a culture of abuse at the heart of the wrestling industry set in motion a vital process of reflection, change and upheaval. This process is far from over.

The Speaking Out movement brought into uncomfortable focus my own complicity as part of the community where these actions took place. It caused me to question my role in wrestling and the place of this research. The ongoing challenges Speaking Out presents to the wrestling industry are undeniable, however, when these events occurred my research was already well underway. Therefore, direct examination of Speaking Out falls outside the parameters of the research presented here. This is not to deny its importance, but rather to signpost these concerns as areas for future research.

In terms of the research and writing I have produced, the consequences of the enforced shutdown of live events was more positive. Without discounting the gravity of the wider situation, in purely research terms, it was of enormous benefit. Time away from the demands of running shows gave me space for introspection. This led to new ways of thinking about wrestling, its history and its artistic merit.

# INTRODUCTION

The scope my research is not all professional wrestling. It is instead dedicated to a specific enclave. While the research makes claims applicable to all wrestling it does so by focusing primarily on the British independent wrestling scene today and my direct experience of it. British independent professional wrestling is home to a small group of creative practitioners that are reimagining wrestling as an exciting and innovative storytelling art. Writing of this community, Claire Warden notes how through ‘innovative, risk-taking playfulness’ these wrestlers and companies are moving ‘wrestling from fake sport into a form that wholly embraces an anarchic performativity’ (2022, p.166). As a result, this wrestling has become a space for a kind of new ‘embodied experimentation’ (2022, p.166). This wrestling challenges, reworks and critiques its own culture and history, as well as the wider world that it is stubbornly embedded within (2022, p.166). This is wrestling with purpose. With urgency. With imagination.

Professional wrestling as a performance tradition and popular entertainment has not gone overlooked or unexamined in scholarship, far from it. Even since commencing this research the field has grown substantially. However, in my estimation, for too long scholarship has spoken *of*, but not *with* those that wrestle. This project seeks to readdress this deficit, offering wrestling a moment to engage with scholarship in a productive way. I am a professional wrestling promoter and a booker of live wrestling events based in the UK. My work is experimental, playful and heavy in the ‘anarchic performativity’ highlighted by Warden (2022, p.166). Through my company, Wrestling Resurgence, I attempt to resist the undeniably problematic facets of wrestling’s past by focusing on creativity and inclusivity. Alongside this wrestling work, I am a creative producer, art curator and early career scholar. I will go on to explain the complexity of my position as this chapter unfolds. For now, I wish to emphasise the uniqueness of this, and how this justifies the use of a voice that is distinctly my own. In this way, it is a work of autoethnographic research. And the tone at times embodies the

nature of the subject and requirements of this methodology: the hyperbole of professional wrestling and the creativity of storytelling balanced with the rigour of academia.

## Review of key Literature

To develop new knowledge and understanding of professional wrestling I use storytelling as a critical lens. In doing so, this research makes a significant contribution to professional wrestling studies, which is a small but ever-expanding field of research. The study of wrestling saw a substantial rise in academic interest from around the year 2000, which has been attributed to mainstream wrestling's growth in popular culture around the same time (Laine, 2014, p.89). For example, 2005 saw the publication of the first academic collection on wrestling, Nicholas Sammond's *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain in Professional Wrestling*. This book included a reprint of Roland Barthes's seminal 1957 essay 'The World of Wrestling', bringing it to the attention of a wider audience. Sammond's book also includes, for the first time, the direct experience of wrestling by a wrestler: Laurence De Garis's 'The "Logic" of Professional Wrestling'.

A defining feature of professional wrestling studies is its interdisciplinarity. Collections of essays dedicated to different facets of professional wrestling, using specific disciplinary lenses, have become substantial repositories of knowledge. For example, performance in (Chow, Laine, Warden, 2016); politics in (Haynes, Levi, Laine, Mazer, 2020); and participatory media (Reinhard & Olson, 2019), and digital media in (Jeffries, 2019). As well as collections, the field features several key ethnographic works. For example, Sharon Mazer's *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Mazer, 2020). Mazer's work was carried out in North America during the late 1980s and early 1990s. She used a combination of fan engagement, direct observation of training and shows, and analysis of televised wrestling productions like WWE and WCW, to argue for wrestling as a form of popular theatre. Mazer's book, originally published in 1998 but updated in 2020, remains foundational in terms of reading wrestling through the lens of theatre and performance. Moving discussions away from earlier ideas of wrestling as a rudimentary morality play, she notes that

'rather than simply reflecting and reinforcing moral cliches, professional wrestling puts contradictory ideas into play'. By working together with audiences, wrestling instead 'replays, reconfigures, and celebrates a range of performative possibilities' (Mazer, 1998, p3). Moving wrestling into the field of performance studies in this way attracted new scholars to the form.

Stepping outside of the geographically dominant North American wrestling scene, Heather Levi's *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity* broadens the research landscape to encompass the cultural hotbed of wrestling in Mexico (Levi, 2008). Levi considers wrestling's embedded position in Mexican society as three levels: 'performance, subculture, and symbol of political culture' (Levi, 2008, xvi). Of pertinence to my project is Levi's deep reading of the wrestler, and how this is understood through interaction between 'the lifeworld of the wrestlers, the complex set of oppositions and alliances between socially marked characters' and the moralistic binaries of heroic babyfaces and villainous heel performance roles (Levi, 2008, p.50). Another important ethnographic contribution is R Tyson Smith's *Fighting for Recognition: Masculinity and Professional Wrestling* (R. T. Smith, 2014). Embedded within a US independent wrestling company for several years, Smith addresses a range of subjects in ways that continue to inform wrestling scholarship's understanding of all professional wrestling. Smith has led the way in analysis of masculinity, violence, pain and injury, but also ideas specific to independent wrestling, such as community and kinship. On independent wrestling specifically, he notes that 'interaction between fans and performers is the defining aspect of the performance' (2008, p.157). He describes the independent scene in the US in terms that are applicable to the UK. For example, he defines this sub-genre as a 'loose-knit association of low-budget, community-based entertainment' unaffiliated with companies like WWE (2008, p.159). Independent wrestling therefore 'consists of pro wrestling schools, websites, and regional promotions' with events typically taking place in smaller venues (2008, p.159). Smith adds that independent promotions typically do not have a TV deal and are instead funded entirely by ticket, merchandise and local advertising revenue (2008, p.159).

Another book that underpins my research is Eero Laine's *Professional Wrestling and the commercial stage* (2020). While I have explored several of theatre and performance scholar Laine's contributions, this text is the most substantial. For much of its relatively short history wrestling scholarship has grappled with how to define what wrestling is, leading to the question 'why study it?' No one has critiqued wrestling studies more extensively than Laine, so I will take time unpacking his work on the challenges facing scholars in the field. Laine argues that 'professional wrestling should be central to many disciplines precisely because it is a popular form and because it taps into, comments upon, and interjects itself into many, many facets of culture and society' (Laine, 2020, p.124). Wrestling is a porous form, using strategies of parody, satire and mimesis to reflect the trends of culture back upon itself. Wrestling greedily borrows and recycles indiscriminately the best and worse society has to offer. However, to be only popular is not sufficient to demand great attention, as Laine states, 'millions of viewers can, in fact, be wrong' (2020, p.3). It should not be taken for granted that wrestling is worth studying for reasons of popularity alone. Instead, it is a case of what can wrestling tell us about the world it reflects. Benjamin Litherland is similar in his appraisal of wrestling's supposed worth. He argues that, rather than seek to locate wrestling as unique, a new generation of scholars would be better focusing on 'its continuities and influences on broader culture' (2018, p.180). In relation to this, and stemming from an explicit concern for storytelling, my focus is on what Laine identifies as the 'vernacular and popular critique that stems from this unique mode of storytelling' (2014, p.83). I have spent considerable time developing wrestling concepts related to storytelling to demonstrate their broader value. For example, while attention has been paid to wrestling specific subjects like 'kayfabe', see (L. Jones, 2019; Laine, 2014; Litherland, 2014; Reinhard, 2019), I develop previously underexplored terminology, such as the meaning of the word 'work'. In pursuing this, I tap into how participating in wrestling 'cultivates a way of watching, reading and criticising that has application far beyond the ring and the arena' (Laine, 2014, p.83). Alongside the texts discussed above, I have examined discrete journal papers and book chapters on the intricacies of wrestling by writers across a range of disciplines. Cumulatively, this body of

secondary research material legitimises the study of wrestling within academia. It constitutes a valuable resource that my own contribution draws on. In carrying out a review of literature, I have found current knowledge to be significantly weighted toward North America, and mainstream companies like World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). However, building on the work of Smith, Mazer, and Levi, a growing number of scholars have chosen to undertake ethnographic research outside these boundaries. Working on independent professional wrestling, rather than often inaccessible mainstream companies, affords such scholars numerous benefits. Focusing on independent wrestling can offer closer proximity to professional wrestling shows; greater access to those performing in them or running them; and more candid insights into the secretive inner workings of the industry. An especially rich example is Annette Hill's research. Working in Scandinavia, Hill has published findings from over two years of ethnographic research into independent wrestling. Her work includes interviews conducted with wrestlers, wrestling promoters and audiences. Hill describes independent professional wrestling as a 'distinctly regional adaptation of a worldwide phenomenon' (2019, p.17). This means that while independent wrestling may exhibit fixed conventions such as entrance music, cards of six to eight matches, and contain similar performance tropes, it also exhibits colloquial features and conventions unique to its locality. This is an important observation, what is true of Hill's Swedish wrestling does not necessarily apply to the UK context. For example, British wrestling shows traditionally feature a raffle during the interval, something that I have found no evidence of outside the UK.<sup>1</sup> Hill's research, while limited to chapters and single articles, does an important job in terms of framing independent wrestling shows as a distinct cultural output. A strength of this work is how it highlights wrestling's use of co-production between promoters, wrestlers and fans, which Hill claims 'shape the affective structure of a live event' (2019, p.29).

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<sup>1</sup> Raffles are taken very seriously in British wrestling. That raffles feature on most shows suggests a connection to other distinctly British community theatre traditions, such as amateur pantomime.

In the US context, which boasts one of, if not the, richest independent professional wrestling scenes Carrielynn D. Reinhard has published work exploring the wrestling concept of kayfabe. Using direct observations gleaned from attending live events she attempts to ‘examine how fans interact with the wrestlers and consider how such interactions advance or hinder the progression of the matches’ (2019, p.36). In attempting a ‘micro-level analysis’ Reinhard provides some useful observations as to how co-creation occurs between wrestlers and the audience, which she links to the idea of convergence culture (2019, p.31). Reinhard observes how the independent wrestlers at the shows she attended perform *with* the audience. In doing so, they ‘blurred lines between producer and consumer identities and positions’ (2019, p.32). However, while she reflects on differences between independent and mainstream wrestling, she does not engage directly with the wrestlers or the company promoters. Nor does her work reflect on what the independent context adds to these performances. Considering such gaps, she concludes by stating that more research is required in terms of ‘how promoters and wrestlers work together to encode professional wrestling texts’ (2019, p.42). This is one of several gaps that my research addresses.

Focusing on the UK, journalist Carrie Dunn’s ethnographic book *Spandex, Screw Jobs & Cheap Pops: Inside the Business of British Pro Wrestling* (2013) offers a broad overview of the independent scene around the beginning of the last decade. It is a far-reaching account that captures both the fragility of the independent scene and the passion of the people working within it. The community that Dunne describes is make-shift in organisation, and do-it-yourself in mentality. It is, however, varied in terms of quality, which causes her to observe how ‘the very name “professional wrestling” balances out very ironically with some of the conduct’ (2013, p.262). Dunne’s work is situated at the start of a UK wrestling boom, one that lasted until the COVID-19 pandemic. However, her account remains an important precursor to my research as it foregrounds many issues that continue to plague the community, such as Speaking Out. Despite its usefulness, Dunne’s work is journalistic in tone, rather than academic, and generalised rather than granular in its approach. Similar in subject, but broader in scope and even more informal in tone, is Keith Elliot Greenberg’s *Too Sweet: Inside*

*the Indie Wrestling Revolution* (Greenberg, 2020). While this work is grounded in fan-discourse, it offers some valuable wrestler perspectives around differences in ethos, style, reception, and production on the independent scene to that of mainstream wrestling. For example, describing the difference in audience reception, one wrestler notes how ‘fans aren’t asking whether its real or not. They recognise that this is an art, this is theatre, this is gymnastics, this is a public speaking space with a lot of improv, and you combine so many facets of athleticism to make it work’ (Greenberg, 2020, p.12). This testimony suggests the global independent scene has been broadly successful in cultivating an open space where multiple types of wrestling co-exist. The range of interviews Greenberg has gathered also shows the creative freedom wrestlers enjoy outside of mainstream wrestling. This independence of the individual is a vital part of independent wrestling. One wrestler for example notes that when working independently, ‘you’re your own boss, and you’re in charge of you own marketing. It’s your job to sell yourself, no different than if you’re trying to sell a character in a movie or a comic book or a video game’ (Greenberg, 2020, p.12). Having explored scholarship on wrestling, I have found it often hamstrung. This is perhaps because, as a genre, wrestling is simultaneously large and old and niche and new. Consequently, many academic accounts fall into the trap of having to first explain what wrestling is to an audience likely unfamiliar with it. In other words, it often reads like a chapter on a specific film having to first explain what film is. Within this thesis, I journey far further into the art of wrestling than any previous account.

What is independent wrestling?

The British independent professional wrestling scene consists of promoters, wrestlers, supporters, podcasters, journalists, merchandise designers and content creators. Wrestling of this type happens throughout the UK, with most towns and cities home to at least one promotion. There are regional hotbeds of activity in the Northwest, London, South Wales and the Midlands, where cities often host multiple promotions. Wrestling promotions come in a variety of types. For example, House of Pain in Nottinghamshire operates a training school, and runs low-cost family shows featuring their own trainees. Promotions like House of Pain are embedded in their local community and play a vital role

in training wrestlers and introducing young people to live wrestling for the first time. Then there are larger companies running events nationally and occasionally internationally; London's Progress Wrestling (Progress) and Revolution Pro Wrestling (Rev Pro) being the most prominent examples. These larger independent promotions privilege high production value, book international talent, and attract highly engaged fans that travel nationally to support them. Progress and Rev Pro are examples of a standard model followed by independent promotions, with similar promotions operating in Europe and the US. In between these two types of promotions are a myriad of smaller companies fulfilling various stylistic niches – such as hardcore, comedic and theatrical sub-genres. These companies are the ones that particularly interest me as they are often the most experimental and innovative.

Wrestling may occur throughout the world, but each territory has its own idiomatic features. Of the UK, for example, Tom Phillips notes that 'the contrast of the bleak with the bombastic seems to typify considerations of British wrestling' (Phillips, 2018, n.p.). Wrestling in the UK graces venues as diverse as nightclubs, town halls, theatres, art galleries, sports centres, bingo halls and working-men's clubs. Often the inherent theatricality of the genre contrasts with the utilitarian architecture of these venues, and there is something distinctly British about watching live wrestling in such spaces. There are also often clear stylistic differences between the wrestling happening in the UK compared to other territories. Today many genres of in-ring work co-exist, but historically the UK is associated with a style that privileges the sport of wrestling. It is a style based around authentic submission wrestling and grappling. Litherland notes that, despite a growing influence from North American wrestling<sup>2</sup> during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'British wrestling retained its own style: it was methodical, slower-paced but technically more accomplished, using complex submission holds, and the 2 out of 3 falls match structure' (Litherland, 2018, p.168). Globally this is now referred to as the 'World of Sport style', which is a name derived from the television show that broadcast wrestling in

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<sup>2</sup> American wrestling historically privileges showmanship, highly produced presentation, and soap-opera storytelling. It is also recognised for a slower style of ring work and larger athletes compared to the UK.

the 1970s and 80s. This is one of a handful of distinct international styles, alongside the aerial-dominant Mexican 'Lucha Libre' and Japanese 'strong style' variants (Litherland, 2018, p.179).

As well as traditional styles associated with nationality, the prefix 'independent' is also important, especially in terms of storytelling. Wendy Fonarow's work on the British independent music scene provides a useful starting place for understanding the meaning of 'independent' in forms like wrestling. Fonarow is keen to stress the importance of differentiation as an appeal of independent genres, suggesting that 'creating a boundary means creating an identity' (2006, p.26). To follow an explicitly independent genre is to enter a community that seeks to identify itself through differentiation – kinship based on what it is not as much as what it is. Fonarow points to several characteristics of indie music that are applicable to wrestling, such as its commitment to 'a distinctive mode of independent distribution' (2006 p.26). For independent wrestling this started with DVD distribution<sup>3</sup> in the early 2000s (Greenberg, 2020, p.125). This then transitioned into digital streaming services, such as the US-based Independent Wrestling TV (IWTV) which carries the content of several UK and international promotions. Platforms like IWTV are spaces that support a community of independent promotions, and while each are distinct, they often have shared values. Fonarow further notes how Independent genres also differentiate themselves through 'stylistic conventions' (2006 p.26). In wrestling terms, such conventions, while constantly shifting, commonly concern aspects such as in-ring action, the use of licensed music for wrestler entrances and differences in audience participation within the live event experience. For example, Reinhard observed in her field work playful independent wrestling conventions, such as a 'spot' where 'four wrestlers performed every move and reaction in slow motion' (2019, p.38). The slow-motion 'gimmick' is frequently used on independent shows in the UK, US and Japan, but would almost certainly not be seen in a mainstream company like WWE. This is because such spots blatantly call attention to the staged nature of wrestling. In Reinhard's example the slow-motion gimmick saw the

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<sup>3</sup> A distribution mode still used to great effect by the influential California promotion Pro Wrestling Guerrilla.

referees, commentators and even the crowd playing along in slow-motion with the performers. This kind of meta-storytelling, and disregard for realism, predicated on a different kind of audience participation with the live event, is often an important feature of experimental independent wrestling.

As well as the comedy highlighted in Reinhard's example, independent wrestling also differs in terms of the in-ring moves, match structure and tempo. For both wrestlers and fans, the label 'independent' is often synonymous with the wrestling concept 'work-rate'. By performing a supposedly higher work-rate, independent wrestling is held up by its supporters, wrestlers and promoters as stylistically superior to the slower, lower risk, style common in companies like WWE. For example, In their autobiography<sup>4</sup>, influential former-independent wrestling tag team the Young Bucks declare the independent style to be 'more athletic, harder hitting, and acrobatic' (Jackson & Jackson, 2020, p.204). While it should be said that the Young Bucks are clearly invested in the idea that their work is of a higher quality to their mainstream counterparts, 'work-rate' is a widely debated subject within wrestling fandom. Depending on perspectives, the term is used both as a positive and a negative label for independent wrestling (Snowden, 2014, n.p). For example, independent wrestling events are said to contain matches with higher work rate, meaning the matches densely filled with action, worked at a higher tempo and contain more high-risk spots. Typically they are also more balanced in terms of how the wrestlers are presented. This means that it is common for both wrestlers to be presented as approximate equals<sup>5</sup>, with attacks shared out rather than weighted toward one wrestler over another. This is due to the independent status of wrestlers, which means they must often be more protective over how they are portrayed. For an

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<sup>4</sup> I acknowledge that the use of autobiography can present challenges, but in dealing with a topic seldom explored by traditional academic sources, biography has been a valuable tool.

<sup>5</sup> The inverse of this being the 'squash match' which is a storytelling convention almost exclusive to televised wrestling, and therefore associated with the mainstream genre. A 'squash match' is when one wrestler is presented as more dominant than their opponent. 'Squash matches' are used to build interest in a character among the audience, as well as to create fictional momentum by racking up victories. Arguably, the most successful employment of the 'squash match' was 1990s WCW star Bill Goldberg, who, en-route to winning the World Heavyweight Championship, amassed hundreds of victories, most of which were squash matches lasting only a few minutes.

independent wrestler, a match where they are presented as significantly inferior to their opponent presents a risk to their reputation. For example, such a presentation could affect how the audience perceive them the following night in a match for a different company.

Conversely, a high-work rate style is often criticised. For example, traditionalists like former storyline wrestler manager and backstage producer Jim Cornette, view the increasing prevalence of high work-rate matches as corrosive to the traditional storytelling of wrestling. This criticism leads to derogatory phrases like 'spot monkey', which is used to refer to a wrestler as too reliant on risky or acrobatic manoeuvres to ingratiate themselves with the audience. In June 2016, a match between popular independent wrestlers Ricochet and Will Osprey became a magnet for this type of debate. Cornette's response to the match, which featured Ricochet and Osprey exchanging long flowing sequences of highly acrobatic (but heavily choreographed) counter manoeuvres was unequivocal: 'it's not a wrestling match when you do shit just to do it and not to simulate a real contest or struggle of any kind' (Mitchell, 2016, n.p). For Cornette, the lack of adherence to concepts like kayfabe and wrestling psychology, meant it lacked authenticity. What this points to is how wrestling storytelling is often a source of contention, especially for proponents of experimentation and creativity. It should be noted that this specific version of the match took place in New Japan Pro Wrestling, Japan's biggest mainstream wrestling company, and not fitting of the term independent. However, it is common for international independent wrestlers to perform for Japanese companies while maintaining their independent status. For example, in the UK for Defiant Wrestling, or for California-based independent company Pro Wrestling Guerrilla. This is complex, but in effect the style of many NJPW matches is often closer to independent wrestling than US mainstream companies. For example, in regard to NJPW, performers are reported to have greater freedom in choreographing their matches (Jackson & Jackson, 2020, p. 178–9). Further, due to the growing influence and popularity of independent wrestling, higher work-rate is now increasingly seen in WWE itself, and of course AEW, a mainstream company founded by independent wrestlers.

The next point of difference between mainstream and independent identified by Fonarow pertains to the rather ambiguous word 'ethos'. In wrestling, like in music, fashion and cinema, ethos denotes a way of doing things depending on a certain set of shared values. Ethos for example might shape the way a company operates, or it could mean adherence to certain political positions. Prior to signing a controversial deal with WWE, London-based Progress Wrestling was seen by many as an example of a company aligning with both stylistic wrestling conventions and a certain set of values. Litherland, Phillips and Warden have explored how, over the last decade in the UK, several pro-wrestling companies, including Progress Wrestling, became vehicles for the progressive values of certain sections of their audiences, as did several prominent independent wrestlers (Litherland, Phillips and Warden in Mazer, Levi, Laine, & Haynes, 2020). The authors note how the scene at that time appeared 'charged with a kinetic, progressive energy' and concluded that professional wrestling is 'as potentially democratic as autocratic, radical as reactionary, reformist as conservative' (2020, p. 134–5). This work demonstrates how studying independent wrestling requires an understanding of this highly contested community. A community that is in a constant state of negotiation and revision as part of broader 'palimpsestic cultures and belief systems' (2020, p.134). Understanding the importance of the label 'independent' to those engaged in the community, can help explain both how storytelling helps bind the scene together, but also what stories are told and how they are told. Fonarow for example notes how members of independent communities not only seek entertainment, but also see their support as 'an expression of cultural sentiment and as a nexus of moral ideals' (2006, p.2). Within such communities ethos and style work together, becoming a type of 'critical assessment', where 'independence' is also a way to determine the artistic and political merit of a given cultural product (2006, p.26).

R. Tyson Smith has observed in his research how both fans and wrestlers draw an 'almost moral distinction' between the 'superior' qualities of independent wrestling and its mainstream counterpart. Smith recognises that members of the wrestling community 'take some pride in their disaffiliation' (2014, p.10). This sentiment is perhaps best encapsulated by the obtuse protest chant

‘this is wrestling’, which is used by audiences to highlight when a performance meets the standard they value. The attribution of this chant is applicable to a whole range of factors, including rate of work, storytelling and audience participation.

## Liveness

One of the aims of this research is to shift wrestling discourse away from its somewhat entrenched disciplinary locations. However, one concept derived from performance studies that is especially interesting, and worth exploring further in relation to independent wrestling specifically, is around wrestling’s construction and presentation as a live performance form. Here, I am particularly interested in how live independent professional wrestling events throw light on the idea of ‘liveness’.

Liveness has been the subject of debate within performance studies for some time. Famously<sup>6</sup>, Phillip Auslander, rejected the arguments of theorists and practitioners like Peggy Phelan ‘for ontological differences between live and mediatized cultural forms’ (2022, p. 159). Favouring instead a focus on the use of the two in specific contexts. Unsurprisingly, liveness has endured as a key concern of performance studies. Geoffrey Way notes how, ‘since Phelan and Auslander’s initial debate over liveness, what constitutes live performance has been the subject of a great amount of scholarly attention’ (2017, p.391). It continues to raise questions around the role of mediation and technology in relation to questions of immediacy and intimacy. However, resulting from this, debates often present liveness in binary terms: essentially placing the live experience at odds with the mediatized. Way, following the work of scholar Mathew Causey, favours a more complex approach, where liveness exists within a performance ontology. In other words, they view performance as neither ‘exclusively live or mediatized’ (2017, p.391). In the case of wrestling, particularly the independent subgenre, this represents a more apt way of approaching the topic.

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<sup>6</sup> For those within the discipline at least

Professional wrestling is an obviousness example of a form that blends live and mediatized performance during live events. Indeed, the co-existence of both is so established that it is seamlessly woven throughout the live event structure. Wrestling boasts multiple levels of mediatization, which can be traced back to early television broadcasting. In this sense, it is an example par excellence of a form that follows what Auslander calls a 'particular historical pattern' of incursion by meditation onto the live event (2022, p. 158). Wrestling shows originated as live, were then mediated, and then the live form came to replicate the mediated one. The effects of this process are now largely indistinguishable. For example, live wrestling events often feature video screens showing the action within the event space in real time. Screens are also used to display pre-recorded video footage that play as wrestlers enter the performance space, typically accompanied by music. Commentators are also often present during the show, narrating the action back to either a live audience or a future audience watching after the fact via platforms like YouTube or other video-on-demand digital services.

The focus of this thesis is independent wrestling as a primarily live form. I argue in relation to performance studies scholarship on liveness that wrestling offers an important example of a highly mediated artform that requires a physically present audience in the space where performance occurs. Further, that in the independent wrestling context, the presence of an audience is the defining feature of wrestling's liveness. As discussed in greater detail in chapter five on the act and process of wrestling, even when an audience appears to be physically absent, as was the case with some performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, a kind of imaginary audience is required. It is present for example in gaps left by wrestlers for reaction and selling. This live audience is intrinsic to the choreography and gestural vocabulary of the form. In other words, to wrestle is to wrestle in front of someone either real or imagined.

To support the centrality of liveness in independent wrestling events, woven throughout the thesis are numerous discussions and illustrations of wrestling performance practice occurring in front of

and in collaboration with a live audience. Chapter's three, four, and five contain multiple case studies that build on these ideas and show how focusing on independent live wrestling can add to the debate around liveness in performance studies.

Promotor, fan, scholar

Within an independent creative community such as professional wrestling a defining feature is often the interchangeable roles of those that contribute to it. In relation to wrestling specifically, McBride and Bird described this as 'an integration of productive practice and an aesthetic bound to a specific fandom context' (2007, p.167). What we see is a community that is not easily defined along the lines of audience and performer. It is instead akin to what Broderick Chow has termed a 'community of shared practice' (2014, p.83). This project is situated within wrestling's community of shared practice, a community that as a wrestling promoter, I am often proudly, sometimes unfortunately, part of.

Wrestling Resurgence started initially as a one-off event as part of the 2017 *Being Human: A Festival of the Humanities*. Since its inception Wrestling Resurgence has foregrounded its work within processes of research and exchange with artists, arts professionals and academics.<sup>7</sup> Today Wrestling Resurgence operates on two fronts. First, as a fully-fledged commercial promotion running regular live events. Second, as an arts organisation delivering publicly funded projects including the Arts Council England supported 'Art and Wrestling' (2018); 'Everything Patterned' (2019); 'Theatre of Wrestling' (2021); and 'Unruly Music Hall Sport' (2023). Within Wrestling Resurgence, I am the Creative Director, leading the artistic side of the company in terms of event production, talent relations and storytelling, which includes booking the shows, making matches, supporting wrestlers with match-stories and writing the wider storylines that contextualise each match. Over the five

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<sup>7</sup> Who frequently perform duties such as booking, ring announcing and providing commentary for films of matches and events.

years that Wrestling Resurgence has operated, the company has grown in reputation to become one of the most respected in British independent wrestling.

Alongside this literature review it is necessary to reflect on my position within this growing landscape. I am perhaps dangerously close to my subject. This is a strength, but also a hazard. Laine for example notes a tendency in professional wrestling studies to fetishize a form that is 'decidedly and proudly lowbrow' (2014, p.83). When it comes to celebration, or derision, scholars that adopt such approaches risk overlooking the forces that are fundamental to its construction as culture in the first place. Laine notes instead:

Useful in professional wrestling is not that it somehow mimics or replaces the best dramatic literature or avant-garde art or that is somehow the pinnacle of popular storytelling or that it represents, distorts, or riffs on popular culture and politics; rather, professional wrestling presents a model of lowbrow theoretical critique. (Laine, 2014, p.86)

This point underpins the intention of my research method. In exploring wrestling storytelling, I seek value in how and why wrestling uses it, rather than only what wrestling tells stories about. Aiding this are my own insights into the specialised language used by wrestling storytellers, included expanded definitions of specific wrestling terminology. This is underpinned by my own uses of the terms which are the result of direct involvement in practice. This thesis offers new ways of thinking and using the language of wrestling, which might be applicable beyond this thesis, both for wrestling scholarship and practice.

As Laine puts it, 'professional wrestling does not aspire to be fine literature', but that does not mean wrestlers are not imaginative storytellers, or that wrestling is not complex (2014, p.84). A key part of this is a specific reimagining of the wrestling concept 'work', as encompassing of multiple layers and positions of agency. I have developed both knowledge of 'work' as a concept, but also as a new wrestling-informed-method, that could be applied outside wrestling. This approach resists both the celebratory and condemnatory positions of many previous accounts. In developing 'work', I am

inspired by others in the field, such as Laine's writing on the wrestling concept 'kayfabe'. Laine describes 'kayfabe' as 'the contemporary concept wherein we know we're being deceived but we play along' (2014, pp. 90–1). My argument is that to fully understand concepts like 'kayfabe', knowledge of the process is also vital. 'Work' is one such process, *others include terms like 'selling' and 'shoot'*. If as Laine puts it, 'kayfabe' is 'the truth those in power tell you', 'work' is how this false truth is told' (2014, pp. 90–1). My focus therefore is on the 'privileged space where the future of the 'kayfabe' world might be developed, decided, and negotiated' and I develop 'work' as a form of analysis to understand this (Laine, 2014, pp. 90–1).

One final point here, which gives both novelty and urgency to this research, is the duality of my position, as a 'worker', a creator of live events, a user of 'kayfabe' and as a scholar. Discussion of this terminology is threaded throughout the thesis as it occurs in the examples and case studies employed. For example, in Chapter Five where the concepts like 'selling' are explored through a detailed examination of one specific wrestling match.

## Welcome to the Show



Figure 1: Wrestling Resurgence ring announcer Andrew 'Wes' Westerside welcomes the audience.

*I stand in the tech position of the Y Theatre Leicester. Since January 2022 this historic building has been home to Wrestling Resurgence. Looking across a space, illuminated by as many spotlights as can be spared, is a sixteen-by-sixteen-foot ring; the stage behind is framed by LGBTQ+ flags; fans, many of whom have attended every show Wrestling Resurgence and I have run, are seated on the stage, around the ring, and on the balcony overlooking the action. The lights fade, and as the pre-show playlist comes to an end, I ready the music that will signal the start of the show. Wrestling has taken over my life for the last five years. But, despite the stress and anxiety of ticket sales, wrestling's predilection for self-sabotage and controversy, and the thousands of hours of unpaid labour I have poured into it, moments like this, when the show is about to start, keep me coming back. The opening bars of ACDC's 'Thunderstruck' blast out at full volume, Wrestling Resurgence ring announcer Wes<sup>8</sup> makes his way to the ring, amping up the audience en-route. He welcomes all, sets out the ground rules, and then finishes, as he always does, with a battle cry. 'Wrestling Resurgence... Make. Some. Noise!'*

This thesis is divided into five chapters, with the first and second chapters framing the originality of the arguments contained in the final three. Chapter One gets to grips with how storytelling occurs within events of wrestling, asking: what is its function, who has agency, how is it organised, how are stories told and what form do they take. Central to Chapter One is the concept 'work', which is the first of several wrestling-led theories that I have developed in relation to storytelling. Tracing professional wrestling's theatrical ancestry is the topic of Chapter Two. Starting with wrestling's transformation from 'legitimate' contests into full-fledged fixed stories, it examines an array of theatrical and sporting moments, identifying how, when and where these transformations occurred. Not a 'history chapter' in the orthodox sense, this is assembled more like a collage of fragments, moments and unresolved possibilities, with ideas and sources layered rather than interconnected. Chapter Three takes an unprecedented dive into wrestling booking, considering the process of

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<sup>8</sup> Outside of Wrestling Resurgence, Wes is a respected theatre academic and theatre-maker.

arranging matches and determining outcomes. This is a subject that has until now eluded wrestling scholarship. Using my own unique professional experience, I unpack various approaches to 'booking' wrestling shows and matches; conceptualise the significance of 'booking' in relation to storytelling; and show how 'booking' relates to established practices in comparable fields, including curatorial work. Chapter Four is dedicated to wrestlers and their role in storytelling. It makes the case for wrestling as both legitimate and valuable, comparable to more established creative disciplines such as the visual arts, theatre and dance. Arguing that current models do not fully capture the work of wrestlers, and that more complex ones are required, my work considers wrestlers beyond reductive terms like 'gimmick'. Woven throughout is testimony gathered from three professional wrestlers, examining their unique approaches. The thesis reaches its finale in Chapter Five where the focus is on what happens when the work of bookers and wrestlers converge – matches. This chapter claims the match as the creative centre of wrestling storytelling, and includes detail around learning to create matches, the processes that make up the match (including moves and 'selling' of moves) and the match itself, which is comprised of specific elements used to create the match-story, this being the final output of wrestling work.

## **METHODS**

The methodology I have developed over the course of my research takes a wrestling-led approach, using autoethnography informed by storytelling theory. In doing so, I have committed myself to the development of professional wrestling's own theories and methods. Here, I am guided by the claim of Eero Laine, that the 'real use and revitalization' of wrestling might lie in theatre (2019, p.55). Further, that for wrestling to truly realise its epistemological potential, 'we might look to the actual act of wrestling for further methodologies and theories' (2019, p.125). This, he suggests, could be the work of professional wrestling scholarship, which has too often relied only on the application of methods and theories of disciplines outside wrestling. For Laine, wrestling has 'room to develop its

own theories and methodologies' (2019, p.124). Framed by both existing wrestling scholarship and the wider fields of theatre and performance studies, my method is bespoke, combining:

- Autoethnography
- Wrestling practice
- Theatre and performance research methods

### Autoethnography

I discovered during the research process, that the originality of my work is often predicated on being able to bring together first-hand experience of wrestling storytelling with the rigour required by scholarship. To achieve this, I have employed autoethnography alongside more traditional ethnographic methods. Adopting this method quickly yielded significant new knowledge, but the challenge was designing an effective way to interpret and frame it. In response, autoethnography emerged as a guiding methodological principle that held the key to recording my experiences and bringing them into dialogue with my existing knowledge of wrestling. In this respect, I see my contribution as not a departure from the ethnographic work of scholars such as R. Tyson Smith (Smith, 2014), Annette Hill (Hill, 2019) and Sharon Mazer (Mazer, 2020), but rather the continuation and development of this work.

According to Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Jones, autoethnography first appeared in the 1970s, as a way of describing 'the practice of cultural members giving an account of the culture' (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017, p.1). During the 1980s this approach, adopted by researchers from various disciplines, became a method by which 'the importance of storytelling and personal narrative' could be recognised within more traditional methodological frameworks (2007, p.2). The term itself emerged in the 1990s, becoming a 'method of choice for using personal experience and reflexivity to examine cultural experiences' (2007, p.2). To employ autoethnography is to blend the principles, practices and goals of autobiography and ethnography, working at the meeting point of the two methods (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017, p.3). Ellis and Bochner characterise the motivation

behind autoethnography as a desire 'to move ethnography away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation' (2006, pp. 433–4). Jimmie Manning and Tony E. Adams offer the following definition:

Autoethnography is a research method that foregrounds the researcher's personal experience (auto) as it is embedded within, and informed by, cultural identities and con/texts (ethnos) and as it is expressed through writing, performance, or other creative means (graphy) (2015, p.188).

In a text, presented as a conversation on autoethnography (itself an autoethnographic work), Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur Bochner, leading figures in the field, meditate on contrasting approaches. In this analysis, they note how certain colleagues practicing non-autoethnographic methods of research 'want to master, explain, grasp' and to abstract and control their subject (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p.431). This, they argue, stands in contrast to the approach of autoethnography, which they see as a journey driven by desire to 'dwell in the flux of lived experience' (2006, p.431). Whereas those of an exclusively analytical position seek to 'appropriate lived experience for the purpose of abstracting something they call knowledge or theory' (2006, p.431). In contrast, Ellis and Bochner seek to 'feel it, taste it, sense it, live in it' (2006, p.431). Indicative of the appropriateness of this method, Ellis and Bochner, in terms that could apply to both storytelling and wrestling, describe autoethnography as 'unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative' (2006, p.433).

The advantages of an autoethnographic approach are that it enables me to combine personal experience of wrestling with the study of wrestling as a scholar. It also brings together my experience with that of others in the community that are not attached to scholarship. This is achieved through the privileged access granted to me by my embedded position. In this way, Holman Jones and Harris have shown how autoethnographers can use their personal experience to address the work of more traditional qualitative and ethnographic research. This allows the autoethnographers to explore ethical and aesthetic implications for themselves, participants and

audiences, and question relationships of power in the process (Adam et al. 2015, p.25), (Holman Jones, & Harris, 2019, p.2). Translating this into practice, the purpose of using autoethnography to study wrestling as storytelling has three strands within my research:

- Autoethnography to extend, enrich, complement, fill in existing knowledge, within professional wrestling studies and related disciplines, with a focus on storytelling (Adams et al., 2017, p.3).
- Autoethnography to access hidden or specialised knowledge of professional wrestling in relation to storytelling (2017, p.3).
- Autoethnography with something at stake, in other words to highlight how I am implicated and embedded in my findings and the influence of this, especially in relation to those accessing the subject from outside wrestling culture (2017, p.4).

Sally Denshire suggests that autoethnography exists in ‘a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and auto-biography, art and life’ (2014, p.845). I find Denshire’s description especially compelling, and in capturing that, I attempt to balance intellectual rigour (analysis, ethnography etc.) with the persona, with art and with life experience. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner state that autoethnographers ‘must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and in doing so, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders’ (2011, p.4). While it is the case that the field of professional wrestling studies is growing, there is still little in the way of knowledge generated by cultural insiders within academic spaces. While clearly the biographical details I have disclosed already imply that I am not an outsider, in that to do ethnography is to enter a field from outside with the express purposes of understanding it and sharing findings with others outside of the field, neither would I call myself an insider (Adams et al., 2017, p.4). In such a bespoke methodology, such binaries may be oversimplistic. I am both insider and outsider, and often these positions are interchangeable.

## A Storytelling method

Storytelling is a way in which we see the world around us and extract meaning from it. Foundational to this is Jeremy Bruner's work on narrative, noting how 'we organise our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on' (Bruner, 1991, p.4). Storytelling scholar Michael Wilson sees storytelling as a 'tool for navigating our personal and collective journeys' (2017, p.128). He notes how the telling of stories is part of how we relate to our environment and other people, 'to formulate our beliefs, our identities and our values; and then to communicate all of this to our fellow human beings' (2017, p.128). Storytelling is central to autobiography, enabling the writer to go beyond only memory, tapping into personal experience in ways that more forensic research methods might overlook. The most obvious example of this is the frequent use of a first-person perspective. Strategies like adopting different authorial viewpoints are key to the autoethnographic method. Inspired by this, I am engaged in storytelling as a method to study storytelling, a kind of meta-storytelling, to coin a term. In practice, my chosen methodology manifests itself through changes in tone, some obvious and others subtle. For example, the use of lived experience to introduce an important theoretical principle, or recalling what Ellis, Adams and Bochner call research 'epiphanies' (C. Ellis et al., 2011, p.3). The centrality of self, of a distinct personal voice enables me to utilise storytelling to reveal new things about wrestling.

Alongside my own stories and anecdotes, I have also used photographs and testimony gathered from wrestlers and wrestling promoters. Wrestling as a storytelling form privileges the visual, and this is expressed by the photographs that have been selected to illuminate and enrich the written text. These support the text but are also stories themselves. Each photo is by the same photographer, Rob Brazier, and they were taken at various Wrestling Resurgence shows. These photographs are intimately linked to the research in a way that makes them also autoethnographic. Similarly, those wrestlers and promoters who have contributed testimony through field work are present as characters throughout. That wrestling is based on deception and illusion, one might

wonder if there is a danger of being too close to the subjects. Some might question if I have been *worked* by my interviewees. However, in truth, this is not a risk exclusive to wrestling. In fact, that wrestling is so obvious in its use of deception, often in my experience gives it a greater sense of openness. No doubt any interviewer in any discipline must consider the possibility that they are being played by their subject. Further, I have worked with my interviewees in various capacities for several years, and it is precisely their stories that I am most interested in, not the factual accuracy of those accounts. As well as these examples embedded within the aesthetic experience of the thesis through design techniques, autoethnography is further supported by a significant repository of recorded practice. This includes an extensive catalogue of films, interviews, podcasts, and wrestling matches. This is one element of autoethnography, reflecting and revisiting work made in the past, such as a key match to illuminate an idea emerging from the research data.

I use a variety of storytelling techniques across the thesis; the writing in this style is often marked by changes in tone. In a sense, I am inclined to think of these acts in relation to the ‘work’ of wrestling defined in my introduction. First, there is a kind of micro-autoethnography, these tend to be anecdotal and playful, such as reflections on direct experience or obscure facts recalled from wrestling’s rich mythology. While not exclusively confined to the footnotes, I do think of this autoethnography as ‘working’ the footnotes, a kind of extra gesture or inflection placed on top of the moral formal analysis. They are often more specialised and reward a certain level of wrestling fandom, like hidden rewards and achievements in video games. Wrestling, like much popular culture, is inherently specialised. This is part of its appeal, that to access certain levels of meaning requires hard work and long hours.<sup>9</sup> The second use of the autoethnographic method is a more extensive and detailed use of specific examples from my experience and/or knowledge of wrestling. For instance, in Chapter Two when focusing on the intersection between popular entertainment,

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<sup>9</sup> Such as suffering through 22 John Cena Randy Orton matches in the late 00s (Nath, 2021, n.p).

physical culture and professional wrestling, I explore specific work made in relation to the history of wrestling.

The third major employment of autoethnography are interviews, which feature across chapters three through five. These conversations took place between 2020 and 2022. I use a semi-structured approach where the interviewees were provided with the main questions in advance, but additional questions were asked as the conversations unfolded. Jones and Gratton posit that a semi-structured approach enables a 'flexible approach to data collection' and this was valuable as there were often instances where ideas only became apparent during the interview process (Jones & Gratton, 2015, p.177). While this process is qualitative, autoethnography was also used. Here for example I draw on Ellis et al.'s suggestion that 'autoethnographers often maintain and value interpersonal ties with their participants' (C. Ellis et al., 2011, p.6/p.9). This was vital, in that the interviewees were treated as much as collaborators as they were subjects. Ellis et al., note that by focusing on 'interactively produced meanings', autoethnographers can create meaning through a free flow of ideas and conversation.

### A Wrestling-led approach

In the research context of British independent professional wrestling, there is a movement toward studying wrestling by doing wrestling. I use wrestling (booking and producing matches and events) as both the subject and my method for understanding it. This builds on the work of other scholars, but also extends and develops this into something uniquely my own.

Heather Bandenburg, representative of the eclectic skill sets of contemporary wrestling professionals, is a playwright, writer, performer and a wrestler trained at the influential London School of Lucha Libre. Bandenburg has also contributed to the collection *Professional Wrestling: Politics and Populism* (Bandenburg, 2020), as well as publishing the semi-autobiographical book *Unladylike: A Grrrl's Guide to Wrestling* (2019). Throughout both texts, she argues for independent wrestling as a form of radical feminist resistance, and that through progress made by the

independent community, 'wrestling has gained the potential to become creatively and ethically more progressive' (Bandenburg, 2020, p.141). Bandenburg is firmly invested in wrestling as an independent genre, distinct from mainstream iterations, confessing to having little knowledge and zero interest in how the form is presented in companies like WWE. Instead, she is committed to more experimental and progressive approaches, that emphasise theatre and storytelling. Over recent years, working in the progressive wrestling space, she has authored, directed and performed in several wrestling-based plays including the Arts Council England supported 'Mummy Vs' (2021), which explores her experience of becoming a mother for the first time, and NHS Smackdown (2022), which playfully critiques the privatisation of the British National Health Service. These plays are wrestling explorations of specific topics, which is an important difference to plays *about* wrestling.

Central to Bandenburg's work is a kind of empowerment she finds in the ring. Expanding on the notion of wrestling as resistance, she describes how the act of wrestling transforms her body into 'a tool to tell a story' (2019, p.17). Bandenburg's work highlights two important sources of wrestling resistance – storytelling and the body. She is also explicit in affirming the belief that wrestling is an act of expression, arguing that 'wrestling gives people the chance to express themselves in this way, and to align themselves, simply, with storytelling' (2019, p.15). Bandenburg's work is an example of wrestling as a method for reaching out into the wider world and trying to understand. In this sense it is indicative of Laine's call for new writers, new theories and new methods. It is also an example of Chow, Laine, Warden's claim that, 'wrestling might actually provide hope, that it might be the solution rather than the problem' (2017, p.22).

Another important precedent in respect to wrestling-led research is Broderick Chow's journal article 'Work and Shoot: Professional Wrestling and Embodied Politics' (2014). To gather his data, Chow undertook intensive wrestling training, using his own body as the 'primary site of inquiry' (2014, p.74). As well as a 'genuine curiosity to explore the physical capacities', he is driven to use his body as his primary data, and with this embraces its 'corruptibility and tactile sensations' as the objects of

the research itself (2014, p.74). While his findings are predominantly utilised in Chapter Three on wrestling and wrestling matches, his methodological originality has a close bearing on the research findings presented in Chapters Two and Three. Chow's approach, which draws on his experience as a performance scholar and performance artist, while connected, is more overtly embodied in approach than that of Bandenburg. He consciously applies established methods in theatre and performance research and the specific meaning of embodiment that comes from that disciplinary framework. Chow contributes to the development of wrestling-led methods, but also demonstrates the valuable role of a more established disciplinary lens, like those developed by performance studies.

In underscoring this convergence around the role of the body in wrestling and in performance, Claire Warden describes how wrestling 'provides a surprising space of embodied experimentation' (2022, p.167). In their work on the body in and as performance Parker-Starbuck and Mock, for example, state that potential methods are 'ways in which researchers encounter bodies to collect evidence and information, and to gain deeper understanding about performance' (2011, p.211). With the bodies of professional wrestlers so important to understanding the form, and surprisingly frequently overlooked, though I do not wrestle myself, the wrestling body is a central theme, just as it is in wrestling storytelling. Therefore, my enquiries 'are provoked by and increase understanding of particular bodies, i.e., those of specific contemporary wrestlers' (2011, p.211).

Embodiment as Parker-Starbuck and Mock describe it is 'the sense of being in a body or having a body, a conscious engagement with the materiality of sensing bodies, or the experience of practices that are physically manifested' (2011, p.212). My body is not performing wrestling, but my body is frequently in the space where wrestling takes place, and, as mentioned earlier, I have the agency to affect the bodies in performance through my role as promoter and booker. The way I have come to think of this unique position is by reflecting on my experience of being in the wrestling performance space, both physically and cognitively. It encompasses many bodies *of* work and *at* work, my own

and that of others. A similar experience could be connected to the body of the audience, who participate as co-creators and whose bodies frequently encounter those of wrestlers. It is the collective action of individual bodies working together within the event that makes wrestling such a fascinating example of embodied performance practice. It is the body that connects wrestling to theatre and sport and, through both, storytelling, making it the methodological key to accessing knowledge of all three. The shared ubiquity of the body in wrestling and theatre binds the two forms together. In both, the body is inscribed (literally and figuratively) with various meanings. In this sense, Parker-Starbuck and Mock, quoting Simon Shepard, raise the idea that theatre (and I would argue the same to be true of wrestling) is 'not simply an art of bodies but an art of possibility, an event where the limits of body are negotiated, fetishized, imagined somehow else' (Shepard 2008 in Parker-Starbuck and Mock, 2011, p.212). It is this 'art of possibility' that my research accesses through various methods. These concerns run through every facet of my research: how does the wrestling body perform stories? How do bodies work together in generating performance? How are these bodies arranged and organised across matches, shows, storylines? How do they occur in archives, in film, in photos, in interviews and writing? How have wrestling bodies changed over time? How are wrestling bodies encountered, mediated, controlled, practiced and imagined? How are wrestlers presented as characters, as personas, as people?

## Theatre and performance

To say that this thesis has employed an autoethnographic method is accurate, but not on its own sufficient in explaining fully the methodology. It is central but always guided by an array of different ideas and ways of thinking drawn from different disciplines. I have chosen to frame that aspect of method in relation to performance studies research. The justification for this is because these are established disciplines in professional wrestling studies, used in multiple key texts (see) (Chow et al., 2016; Laine, 2020; Mazer et al., 2020). Due to the centrality of the body in wrestling storytelling, they offer the most applicable frame for my research. It is also a measure of where I claim this research can make an impact and a significant new contribution to knowledge. As Eero Laine notes,

‘professional wrestling matters for theatre studies because it is a form of theatrical, live performance with a history that spans the last century and encompasses numerous international traditions’ (2019, p.122). Given the importance to the field, the usefulness of its methods, and the subject itself, my research strategy is designed to embrace a kind of fruitful entanglement in the unruliness of wrestling performance and storytelling. In doing this, I follow others in theatre and performance research, who by ‘dwelling in the ambiguous space between binaries’ cultivate inventiveness and originality (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011, p.2). Kershaw and Nicholson stress that to work in theatre and performance, to collaborate successfully, researchers must ‘get lost, meet obstacles, or generate disagreement’ and that working in this way leads to ‘tacit understandings, inferred practices and theoretical assumptions’, which should be highlighted, integrated and contested (2011, p.2). The conclusions I have arrived at, the assumptions that have emerged, do so in practice and in collaboration, in field work conversations and in live performances. In a sense, I approach wrestling with a methodology based on ‘intuitive messiness’<sup>10</sup> that reflects wrestling’s awkward liminality (between sport/art, simulation/violence, real/fake) and embraces the ‘aesthetic ambiguity’<sup>11</sup> held as intrinsic to research in this field (2011, p.2).

This is the method chapter, the moment where the most time is spent considering questions of research rationale; however, it is not the last time it will be addressed. As a bespoke methodology it is also necessary to detail, in more exacting terms, how findings and analysis has been conducted in relation to specific topics within individual chapters. Each chapter juggles multiple methods together – sometimes dropping one or introducing another to meet the demands of the subject in hand.

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<sup>10</sup> My initiation comes with a track record (working in the space, being a lifelong fan, making things, writing about it), but it is also messy (I am many things in the space at once, such as a researcher, a fan, a non-wrestler).

<sup>11</sup> Wrestling is aesthetically ambiguous in that it draws upon a multiplicity of visual styles, which is seemingly as endless as the aesthetic world around it. Wrestling has always borrowed greedily from whatever the zeitgeist happens to be at the time: glam rock in the 80s, grunge in the 90s, but also science fiction, mythology, sport, horror, etc.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE 'WORK' OF STORYTELLING



Figure 2 Former Wrestling Resurgence Champion Gene Munny makes his signature entrance into the ring.

That storytelling is central to a popular form of entertainment like wrestling is not surprising, but to understand why, it is necessary to briefly consider storytelling in its broadest sense. Storytelling is a term so all-encompassing that it can be tricky to articulate precisely what it means. Film and television producer John Yorke, notes that 'storytelling is an indispensable human preoccupation, as important to us all – almost – as breathing' (2013, xvii.). As a species, we tell ourselves stories while we sleep. Throughout the waking day we daydream through storytelling. It is a process by which we come to terms with the world around us. We think, learn, communicate, through storytelling. As an inescapable facet of human existence, Jonathan Gottschall declares humanity to be a storytelling animal, stating that 'The human imperative to make and consume stories runs even more deeply than literature, dreams, and fantasy. We are soaked to the bone in story' (2012, p.18). As fundamental as it may be to humanities experience of the world; in a thesis, decisions must be made about what to focus on, what to study and how to approach it.

Wrestling is a storytelling art. It is performed live within an event architecture that contains various match-stories, the stories of each character and their interactions, and the wider mythology of the wrestling world and its history. Within these events, wrestlers, audience, referees, commentators, promoters and bookers work together, as co-creators, in collective acts of storytelling. This chapter explores how storytelling functions within the event. It examines how stories are told, what the stories are about, when they are told and by whom, where they are told, how they are organised and how all these elements fit together. Wrestling events are messy, chaotic and often anarchic. To navigate this, storytelling provides an improbable logic, holding everything together just long enough to make it coherent. Across the event, like trapeze artists, the wrestlers, promoters, bookers and audience work to maintain a precarious balance. Storytelling works to form a shared understanding between those participating within it. It is also used to create, negotiate and develop the individual and collective identities of those active within the independent wrestling community.

Stories are told verbally during the event by announcers, by wrestlers on the microphone, by fans during the interval, by commentators for the audience watching online or on television. Stories are told physically by the wrestlers in and around the ring during their matches. Wrestlers also tell stories before and after matches, and before and after the event. Outside of the ring, these stories are told online by wrestlers, by promoters, by audiences, they are written in tweets or recorded on film, and posted on YouTube, on Twitter and on Instagram. These digital forms of storytelling are a vital promotional tool. As acts of storytelling they tell the audience *why* they should attend an event, making statements like: ‘come buy a ticket to witness an epic clash between two bitter rivals’ or ‘come see a villainous wrestler finally get their comeuppance’. Such provocations provide important subtext – it does not only matter that a match is taking place, but we must also know *why* it is taking place. In this sense, scholar Sam Ford views wrestling as a form of transmedia storytelling, noting ‘wrestling is the most prominent example of a fictional world built around serialised live events’ (2016, p.169). Further, he explains in relation to WWE, but applicable also to other forms of wrestling, how ‘wrestling’s various texts blur fiction with reality to include a range of material from

the fictional universe' (2016, p.170). In this sense, it is useful to consider storytelling as a form of world building encompassing of promotions, wrestlers and audiences.

Taking this journey through storytelling means encountering the fundamentals of professional wrestling, those issues central to both scholarship and practice. It also starts to make clear the value of storytelling as a lens for examining the underlying artistic construction of professional wrestling. The goal of the chapter is not to create new knowledge about storytelling, but rather to use knowledge of storytelling to deepen understanding of professional wrestling. By the end of this journey, the case for wrestling as a storytelling art will be clear, and the foundations laid for the more forensic examinations of subsequent chapters. In a sense, it is a process of feeling the subject out.



Figure 3: Kanji and Charli Evans engage in a feeling out process to start a main event contest for Wrestling Resurgence.

If this thesis were a professional wrestling match, it would start with the commentators narrating the 'feeling out' process. This ritual commonly marks the beginning of the match-story: the wrestlers circle one another, fingers are interlinked in the Greco-Roman fashion<sup>12</sup>, holds are tentatively

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<sup>12</sup> Traces of professional wrestling's sporting past, like the Greco-Roman knuckle-lock, are still visible even in current variants.

engaged, a leg hook might lead to a takedown, and an exchange of exploratory strikes<sup>13</sup> escalate in aggression and force. This is often the moment when the two wrestlers touch for the first time. It is an act of starting to tell a story, the story of the match. The feeling out process continues until one wrestler takes overall control of the match. When a match-story starts with an effective feeling out process,<sup>14</sup> the wrestling often takes on the appearance of a physical examination: joints are tested, limbs manipulated, muscles flexed. In storytelling terms, this can serve several purposes: it could demonstrate to the audience how evenly matched the two wrestlers are; or highlight a key point of difference between them. For example, one wrestler might be technically superior, but the other possess greater physical strength. In this way, the feeling out process establishes plot and adds details that grow in significance as the match-story unfolds – an injury for example.<sup>15</sup> It also establishes the wrestlers as characters in the story: the skill of the heroic wrestling character ‘shines’, as does their fastidious upholding of the rules. The villain, by contrast, draws the ‘heat’ of the audience by cheating and taking every shortcut available. I proffer this analogy to evoke several meanings of the phrase feeling out. In engaging in a feeling out, the story of the thesis starts. In such opening moments, the reader is introduced to some of the fundamentals of the subject, here for instance, the role of storytelling in wrestling.

Feeling out, is not exclusive to wrestling. It also occurs in sports like boxing and mixed martial arts, where it denotes a common opening strategy adopted by a dominant competitor. Here, for example, ‘the feeling out process is for figuring out how to hit each other, not for waiting to hit each other’ (Nguyen, 2012, n.p). In that sense, to feel out is to move purposefully, to start on the right

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<sup>13</sup> Typically kicks, heavy slaps, or forearm shots that are ‘pulled’ to lessen damage and injury but still generate a notable sound.

<sup>14</sup> There are of course other ways for wrestling matches to start. The other common start is called a ‘hot start’. This is where the matches begin at break-neck speed, often even before the bell has sounded to officially start the match. For the readers sake, I have chosen on this occasion not to use a hot start.

<sup>15</sup> As I write this sentence, I find myself a few days removed from a Resurgence live event and one match jumps out in respect to this point. In the opening of that match a wrestler used a simple headlock as an early plot point, the applicant of the headlock displayed her superior strength as the recipient tried everything they could to escape. Two key points were established in this interplay, the strength of one wrestler, and the technical ability of the other who tried increasingly complex ways of escaping the headlock.

foot. Outside of combat sport, Merriam-Webster defines 'feeling out', along with 'feel out' and 'felt out' as: 'to talk or question (someone) in an indirect way in order to find out if something one wants to do or get will be possible'. This meaning is present in scholarly inquiry, where feeling out could mean a process of starting to think about a topic. This suggests a similarity (there are many) between, wrestling, storytelling and research. This chapter concentrates on the broadest applications of storytelling in wrestling. In this sense, it is an intellectual feeling out process: a performative act for the reader, who like the audience of the wrestling match, bears witness to and participates in the struggle with difficult concepts, the search for gaps in knowledge, the weighing of arguments and development of claims.

### Storytelling in wrestling

Storytelling dictates how wrestlers perform together in the ring. Storytelling builds real and imagined worlds around it. Storytelling expresses the shared histories and values of the people inhabiting these worlds, all of which are folded back into the ongoing stories of people, places, communities, cultures and societies. Matches are stories. Multiple matches together form longer stories, typically given terms such as 'angle', 'storyline' or 'programme'. Each wrestler has a story. And how they interact with other wrestlers can become stories. Each promotion is a kind of storyworld, made up of the stories of characters and matches. Events are made up of many matches, each itself a story. Fans also have stories. The story of going to the show. The story of discovering wrestling and growing up a fan. All these stories are dependent on one another. Stories in this sense are never the work of a single author, all wrestling stories are co-created – multiple narrative threads spreading out in every direction. These are visible to some but not to all. This is not easy. It is not pretty. Precisely the opposite in fact, wrestling storytelling is as unruly as the behavior in the ring and around the arena.

Early in the research process I concerned myself with trying to explain this centrality of storytelling. What model would articulate this? Initially the idea of concentric circles of storytelling offered

promise: the wrestling ring, referred to as the squared circle, appeared the obvious centre as it contained the wrestlers and the match. Radiating out from this, the stories of the wrestlers, the story of the match, the story of the match within the event, the story of the event made up of multiple matches, the stories of the promotion with its history of multiple events, the story of the promotion within the wider storyworld of wrestling. Alas, I soon found that circles were not the answer, too much was falling through the gaps. Next, layers! Briefly it appeared that this was where the true answers were. Thus followed a similar process ending in similarly unsatisfying results. If I were the 'babyface' (hero) scholar in this story, my 'heel' (villainous) opponent (my subject) seemed to always have the upper hand; the initial brilliance of my early intellectual offence negated by the subject's trickery. However, the heat, the part of the wrestling story controlled by the heel, is always peppered with 'hope-spots' and last-ditch reprieves. In such moments the babyface rallies their resources and attempts to turn the tide of the match. My hope spot came with the realisation that I was approaching the subject from the wrong angle. Rather than somehow working out a system, or imposing an order, a different approach was required.

What I have found from working in wrestling and from studying it, is that its initial simplicity belies deep complexity. What can on the surface appear bloody, anarchic, fraught and dangerous, is often in reality carefully composed, technically sophisticated and possessing of genuine beauty. In an article weighing different approaches to understanding complex systems, sociologist John Law explores 'questions to do with size, scale, connection and method' (2004, p.19). In doing so, Law compares an orthodox 'romantic' conception of complexity, favoured by many scholars, with an alternative that he terms the 'baroque'. The romantic, is 'predominant in academic conditions', and considers 'large (and not so large) things', by looking up (2004, p.24). As a result of this way of making sense of the world, grand models and encompassing systems of explanation are proffered. This way of thinking plagued my preliminary skirmishes with wrestling. By contrast, a baroque lens, which evokes the ornate, and is synonymous with the artistic style the word derives from, is a way of 'discovering complexity in that detail' (2004, p.19). Law argues romanticism gravitates towards

generalisation. This tendency to generalise, is something I have encountered in professional wrestling studies. Kit MacFarlane for example notes how professional wrestling is often 'either lovingly held up as a representative of working class entertainment and aspirations or is roundly condemned for its perpetuation of damaging ideas, ideals and stereotypes' (2012, p.137). The baroque takes a different approach. The baroque looks down, and in doing so, embraces heterogeneity, complexity within and favours the specific over the general (Law, 2004, p.24).

Despite noting the difficulty of achieving this within 'canons of the academy', the baroque 'enables a move away from generalised models in favour of detail' (Law, 2004, p.24). Following Law, in favouring a baroque approach to wrestling storytelling, 'there may be no need to pull it all together; and, indeed, that it is impossible to pull together and that to try to do so is to miss the point' (2004, p.23). To understand wrestling in this mode of complexity is to recognise how for Law, 'to know something, indeed, to know it well, is not necessarily to make it explicit', and 'It may be enough to reflect or refract or enact or embody it in both practice and in theory' (2004, p.23). 'Enact' and 'embody' are terms that undoubtedly resonate with wrestling. My approach therefore could be said to prioritise 'complexity within' and the 'complexity of the small', and for the chaotic art of wrestling storytelling, it also privileges the 'noncoherent and the sensuous' (2004, p.24). Storytelling here is slippery. In one way, it facilitates its complex, adding to the action in the ring. In another way, it makes wrestling more bearable, organising its chaotic physicality by imposing narrative on to it.

In the end, it is the baroque that I have sought. That is because wrestling, especially independent wrestling, is riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies. It is the chaos that is fundamental to its appeal to those that watch it, that perform it and study it. To somehow contrive grand solutions or impose fixed systems is to 'botch' the point entirely. It overlooks what makes wrestling's use of storytelling interesting in the first place – its messiness.



Figure 4: Alex Windsor and Rhio brawl outside the event space and into the venue café.

During my field work, an independent wrestling promoter told me something that stuck. That all the art he consumed, especially wrestling, had to contain an element of danger, identifying the ‘moment where everything could fall apart’ as vital (East, 2020). A sense of jeopardy is evident throughout his promotion’s events, where he wants the audience to feel the show is ‘on the verge of falling to pieces’ (East, 2020). This idea of independent wrestling as an anarchic type of storytelling is fascinating. So, while it is not my intention to inflict this feeling upon the reader,<sup>16</sup> I agree with this promoter, in that I suspect the function of storytelling in independent wrestling is to take us as close to chaos as possible, without descending entirely into disarray. Vitally, storytelling scholarship offers a way to profit from disorder. How to make use of *messiness*.

Informed by sociologist John Law and his work on complexity, and combined with that of storytelling scholar Michael Wilson, messiness becomes a way of understanding the complex role storytelling plays in today’s culture. Taking Law and Wilson together, forming a kind of wrestling odd-couple tag

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<sup>16</sup> Well... At least not for the entirety of the thesis.

team,<sup>17</sup> mess becomes a strategy or as Wilson puts it, ‘mess to deal with mess’ (Wilson, 2014, p.126). This is because storytellers, and those that study it, are experts in mess. Wilson notes for example how ‘narrative scholars have long since embraced mess, and storytelling-practitioners understand their discipline as being the ultimate in messiness’. (2014, p.125). Narrative scholars, according to Wilson, practice the contradictory principles of ‘to be messy in and of itself’ and ‘to enable meaning making and clarity where mess exists.’ (Wilson M, 2014). Mess in wrestling is a productive force that conjures with it other messy habits like experimentation, collaboration and improvisation. All of which are part of the work of the wrestler. Wilson’s claim is that storytelling’s current mess is symptomatic of its place in the digital world. However, by embracing it, this mess can be used to navigate the ‘multiplicities of forms, of media, of perspectives, of truths, of meanings of texts, of relationships’ that result from it (Wilson M, 2014, p.126). Storytelling scholarship is a useful lens for studying wrestling for precisely these reasons. Wrestling has been quick to adapt its storytelling to the digital world, with Twitter, YouTube and other social media platformers used in its pursuit. Sam Ford sees wrestling’s use of multiple media platforms, across which there is a ‘constant blurring of distinctions between “real” and “fake”’, as a key part of how it tells stories (Ford, 2016, p.169). He notes how fans are invited to ‘shape the direction of the narrative at various points in the storytelling process’ (Ford, 2016, p.169). Doing so gives wrestling different perspectives, meanings and relationships to the stories being told.

In utilising digital media, wrestling storytellers are embroiled in the messiness Wilson describes as symptomatic of all storytelling today. Wrestling’s whole history is one of embracing mistruth, always reworking, retelling, finding the profit margin in the telling of a tall tale. In this sense, wrestling also demonstrates more abstract qualities, such as those John Law attaches to working with mess. Citing Law, Wilson says of storytellers, as I would say of wrestlers and wrestling promoters, that they

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<sup>17</sup> For purposes of storytelling, wrestling bookers often arrange seemingly disparate characters into team. For example, two former adversaries that must work together, and in doing so overcome their prior animosity. For the reader clued up in wrestling culture, I offer Goldust and Booker T’s WWE as a particularly successful example.

‘embrace the vague, diffuse, or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct’ (Law 2004, in Wilson M, 2014, p.125). This points to far older ways of thinking about storytelling. Mess is often attributed to the ephemerality of storytelling, so when Wilson states that stories ‘perform the moment and then are gone, only to reconstruct themselves and reappear for the new moment, the new context’, he could point to wrestling as an example par excellence (Wilson M, 2014, p.126). The match is performed in the moment, but will reappear again and again, show after show. There is a somewhat strange irony here in that, matches are unique, none-ever quite the same, but they are also repetitive in that fundamentally a wrestling show is only ever a collection of matches that follow roughly the same template, over and over.

While repetition is a key structural feature of wrestling events, when it comes to what happens in the match, creative responsibility rests with the wrestler. Former-WWE wrestler Bret Hart, one of wrestling’s acclaimed storytellers, is a coherent biographer, especially regarding the storytelling aspects of his wrestling work. Hart states how he ‘never once saw a script for a pro wrestling match. It was up to the wrestlers to tell the story’ (Hart, 2007, p.24). While Hart is writing here about the late 1980s and the 1990s, and in specific relation to mainstream wrestling, from interviewing others active in the current wrestling scene, and in my own experience, this statement holds up. Wrestling matches are not written down in any conventional sense. This means that while matches may be documented by commentators, fans and journalists in writing, film and photography, the actual choreography does not exist in notation, as it might in dance for example. While theoretically it would be possible to create a facsimile of a Bret Hart match, like any wrestling match, there would be little purpose from a storytelling perspective. Each match must be unique in the moment of its performance, just like the competitive sporting contests that inspire them, or else the illusion of a ‘real’ sport fails. Matches do however contain many individual repeatable elements, which provide continuity and aid the audience. So, while matches are never reconstructed entirely, they do reoccur again in different places and at different times, often with different tellers and in front of different audiences. To keep matches varied, different types and motifs are used, such as tag team matches,

cage matches and no disqualification bouts. This use of motif makes the match repeatable, but also varied, like the way folktales use different tale types.



Figure 5: The Rocking Souls and Munnywood Blondes perform a wrestling homage to 1980s North American tag team wrestling. In a sense, matches like this retell stories from wrestling past.

Bridging wrestling and more traditional forms of storytelling, William Duff, has considered the oral poetics of wrestling. Following storytelling and folklorist Richard Bauman, Duff claims that due to its ‘complicated narrative structure’ which is ‘neither wholly discrete nor wholly serialized’ wrestling blends improvisational and formulised composition (2014, p.134). Therefore, Duff argues that wrestling storytelling falls under Bauman’s category of ‘communicative performance’ (2014, p.132–4). This works on three fronts: composition, narrative, and the relationship between them. Duff argues wrestlers, like oral storytellers, ‘employ their own set of techniques and stock story elements to compose their piece – the wrestling match’ (2014, p.132). For example, one member of a tag team might turn on the other and in doing so create a new story based around the rivalry between them. This is a well-worn stock story occurring throughout wrestling history. Wrestlers then, like

storytellers, practice repetition, have routines, and repertoires that are used throughout their narrative craft. In storytelling terms, due to its mixed narrative, Duffy likens wrestling storytelling to oral traditions, in that they 'exhibit the same interplay between discrete tale and overarching storyline.' (2014, p.132). It is through this combination of repeatable elements that the language of wrestling as a storytelling practice has developed.

## Work

Using its own unique language, wrestlers re-make classic stories, adding different truths, new meanings, from original perspectives. The language that wrestling uses to tell stories is both oral and physical. It contains named moves, actions, sequences, spots and techniques that are performed by the bodies of the wrestlers, but it also has words that denote this language and illustrate its meaning. Much of this evocative jargon is traceable back to the carnivals and fairgrounds of North America in the late eighteenth century. These words often stem from what Wilson Koh calls the 'historical hyper-protectiveness' of the wrestling industry (Koh, 2017, p.461). Suggesting that 'over time this slang evolved its own terms specific to the secretive world of wrestling' (Koh, 2017, p.461). Decoding the spoken language of wrestling further highlights the form's intimate relationship with storytelling and its deep knowledge of narrative art.

Of all the words in the peculiar vernacular of professional wrestling I find 'work' most compelling. It is layered in meaning, messy in use and important in application. 'Work' also has theoretical significance. I have spent time developing the concept of 'work' in relation to storytelling. Present throughout the thesis is the claim that 'work' is an especially productive mode for thinking about wrestling as storytelling art. Where 'work' is happening, so is storytelling. To think of wrestling through 'work', is to think about both the theatrical façade and reveal the inner workings together. Part of its strength is the way it's wrestling meaning coalesces with its many meanings outside wrestling. Work denotes activity and labour; implies action, industry and productivity; it is also associated with fatigue and effort. To work something out is to find a solution, solve a problem and

to see something through to its conclusion. Detectives 'work' a case until it is solved. Hard work is rewarded. To be workshy or an unproductive worker is stigmatised. All these broader meanings strengthen the power of 'work' in wrestling. In my research, 'work' is the work of wrestling, of academic inquiry, of storytelling, in both the wrestling and non-wrestling sense of the term.

The meaning of 'work' in wrestling is multiple: wrestlers are 'workers'; poor wrestlers are 'bad workers', skilled ones are 'good workers' (Kerrick, 1980, p.142). A wrestling match is 'a work'. To wrestle is 'to work'. 'Work' in wrestling is pretence (and the performance of that pretence), through which stories are created and consumed. 'Work' is how the stories of wrestling are told. George E. Kerrick, in a study of wrestling language offers a cursory etymology:

The word, work, is probably the single most important term in the jargon; it is used as various parts of speech with subtle differences of meaning. For example, any rehearsed or preestablished plan or movement is also a work; everyone actively involved in such a work anticipates what is to happen and reacts to the plan. (Kerrick, 1980, p.142)

This definition lays out the broadest meaning of 'work' in wrestling, but others in wrestling studies have added to it. Andrew Zolides for example notes how 'work' 'refers to anything that is scripted to occur or planned in advance' (2019, p.47). Certainly, it is the case that 'work' is contrived, but to work on the fly has also always been vital to a form that is semi-improvisational, requiring working on the spot as well as scripting in advance. The historic meaning of 'work' conjures up<sup>18</sup> notions of artifice, trickery, illusion and fakery and is therefore best understood in relation to the related term kayfabe. A basic example of 'work' would be simulating an injury and playing it to the audience as real. Zolides further suggests that 'work' 'distinguishes pro wrestling from both competitive sports and other kinds of fictional narratives' (2019, p.47). I agree, it is 'work' that makes wrestling a combat art not a combat sport. Similarly, Luke Stadel notes that it was the emergence of 'work' that 'transformed wrestling performance into a legible physical grammar, a grammar that would serve to

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<sup>18</sup> Pun intended.

make the performance intelligible within the larger narrative framework' (2013, p.358). Here 'work' is the method for bringing stories to life in the ring and connecting it to the wider storyworld created around it. In a sense, 'work' joins the sport of in-ring performance together with storytelling.

Extending this, Kerrick notes that 'the term does not connote athletic ability or strength, but instead the ability to perform well, to look good' (Kerrick, 1980, p.142). In this way, 'work' and storytelling are inseparable.

Broderick Chow has also written about 'work'. Going beyond its meaning as presenting the staged violence in wrestling as real, he connects the more functional meaning of working as 'a physical improvisation in which one worker responds to another's somatic, visual, and aural cues' to labour politics (2014, p.74). Noting how in wrestling, work does not only hold the abstract value noted by Marx, it is also 'the corporeal act of making and doing', and that it 'acknowledges and values labour' (2014, p.74). This is of particular concern to my research, that the work of the wrestling stems in the first instance from the body. The wrestler uses their body in the art of storytelling, and their body is also the story. For example, the story of what happens during the match-story as it is subjected to attacks and holds. The body working to perform combat. Importantly, Chow also points out how 'work' always occurs in relation to a second term, 'shoot'. This word is generally wrestling jargon for something that is real, but this is also messy. 'Shoot', like 'work' can mean a range of actions such as an unscripted promo, the incorporation of personal circumstance into stories, or a real injury.

Adding to the mess, there is even the modern phenomena of the 'worked-shoot', which Koh has defined as 'argot for those storylines that extend the liminal space between artifice and authenticity' (2017, p.459). The interplay of 'work' and 'shoot' is critical to wrestling storytelling. Broderick Chow notes for example that 'the ever present possibility of shoot... makes wrestling exciting' (Chow, 2014, p.74). Wrestling matches, promos and other ancillary texts blend 'worked' and 'shoot' elements together. Therefore, the thrill is in going along on that ride with the workers, being 'worked' by them, always with an awareness of the danger of the 'shoot'. This liminality does not

just make wrestling exciting to fans, it is a source of interest for scholars. In academia, the ‘work-shoot’ tension is critical to understanding what Claire Warden has called the ‘unpredictable borders between the fake and the real, the parodic and the authentic’ (2020, p.147). Storytelling in wrestling as in life is a never-ending, always changing phenomena by which notions of truth, fakery, morality, are subservient to the never-ending working of a good angle, a new spot, the next show. It is storytelling ‘work’ (and stemming from that ‘kayfabe’) that holds the wider architecture together, it functions as a kind of logic by which the work maintains its coherence.

### Wrestling events



Figure 6: A Wrestling Resurgence live event at Nottingham Contemporary art gallery in March 2020

Unlike mainstream wrestling, where live events are recorded weekly for television and streaming and build toward bigger pay-per-view events, independent wrestling events are typically organised monthly or bi-monthly. Sam Ford notes how this is not the case for mainstream companies, where weekly television events act as the primary ‘narrative drivers’ with stories unfolding at a quicker pace and are typically concluding or reaching a climax at monthly Pay-Per-View (PPV) shows (Ford,

2016, p.172). In contrast to this, as one UK promoter I spoke to put it, independent wrestling only has PPV events. This means that to make a story successful and engaging, success in independent wrestling is about using storytelling within the event effectively.

The event is central to all wrestling storytelling. It is the container for the matches, the promos, the audience and all the other storytelling elements. Like a leaky vessel, the wrestling event attempts (often ineffectively) to contain<sup>19</sup> storytelling. Within, across, surrounding the event are different registers of reception, each jockeying for position in the imaginations of those participating in it. The repeatable structures of events and matches, and the commonalities with forms like event storytelling, invite interesting comparisons. Richard Bauman, folklorist, and scholar of oral storytelling, sees the 'performance event' as 'a fundamental unit of description and analysis' in that it directs 'attention to the actual conduct of artistic verbal performance in social life' (Bauman, 1986, p.3). Bauman notes that as well as setting, institutional context and scheduling, the performance event results from a kind of 'interplay' between various organising forces and local elements. This includes 'participants identities and roles'; 'the expressive means employed in the performance'; 'social interactional ground roles, norms, and strategies for performance and criteria for its interpretation and evaluation'; and 'the sequence of actions that make up the scenario of the event' (Bauman, 1986, pp. 3–4). The work of unpacking these elements, and more, as present within and imposing upon wrestling events invites detailed consideration of the processes underpinning them. This includes wrestlers, event promoters, promotions and audiences. In applying this to platform oral storytelling in the context of literary festivals Wilson sees event as creating a 'sense of occasion' (2006, p.60). Wrestling shares in this. Wilson notes how dedication of an event occasion 'defines the storytelling in the first instance' (2006, p.60). The wrestling event is what gives the act of wrestling its meaning. Storytelling for Wilson is always 'mediated by the structures of the event itself, and so changes the very nature of what is being admired' (2006, p.60). The same is true of much sport,

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<sup>19</sup> Its purpose here is not to contain, merely to perform the appearance of trying to contain the story, even knowing the futility of this. It is a performance of control.

where it is possible to simply play football outside of the event structure of a football match and all that this implies. Here then is an important difference, professional wrestling is inseparable from its mediating structures.

Comparing professional wrestling events with the tournament drama of medieval England, Lucy Nevitt notes how the event structures emerge not because of 'common visual/performance codes' but rather through 'the deeper-seated fact of their combat performance nature' (2006, p.39). Nevitt suggests that regardless of whether it is constructed as genuine sport, or athletic dramatisation, the presentation of wrestling as a performance is defined by what it is portraying (sport); and how it is organised (the sporting event). In other words, performing combat dictates how the event is organised. Indeed, the narrative wrestling matches use come not from drama per say (such as a written text), but rather a desire to portray the sporting aspects of wrestling as real. It is from sport, that the wrestling event, and the stories told within it, takes its presentational structure. Based on this, each match-story follows a repeatable pattern derivative of its construction as sport.

In combining storytelling and sport, wrestling has established an array of fixed conventions. Sport is the defining structural convention. For example, the match story starts with the introduction of the competitors and the referee by a compare. The announcement of the rules follows, including how long the match will last (duration) and under what circumstances it will end (stipulation). These conventions are often ritualistic, such as the announcement that a match will be 'scheduled for one fall'.<sup>20</sup> Many of these act as common storytelling cues, such as 'once upon a time'. The match then starts with the ringing of a bell, as is the case in Boxing. The match can conclude in many ways, commonly with a pin fall or submission counted or declared by the referee, followed by a second sounding of the ring bell. The winners hand is held up by the referee, then any rewards or prizes are acknowledged and finally the participants exit (Nevitt, 2006, p.39). There are further conventions within and around this of varying complexity and uniformity. Each wrestling event is comprised of

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<sup>20</sup> 'One fall'.

anywhere from five to twelve matches. In most cases the matches all follow this process, which Nevitt describes this as the 'introduction-competition-completion formula' (Nevitt, 2006, p.39).

Nevitt argues that this fixed nature of sporting structure is separate from the fluid presentation common to theatre. While she is correct to emphasise the fixed structure of the wrestling event, it's worth also pointing out the theatrical forms that contain similarities, like music hall, variety and vaudeville shows. You can also find similar structures in platform storytelling and music festivals. Cenate Pruitt for example has compared wrestling events to heavy metal concerts, noting how similarities in structure 'make for a natural relationship built on spectacle, authenticity, and extremity' (2019, p.5). It is a valuable comparison, which is applicable to many sports, but arguably first appeared in wrestling. The convention of wrestlers walking to the ring accompanied by popular music is now widely adopted in boxing and in team sports.<sup>21</sup>

Understanding wrestling shows as storytelling events raises questions about where they take place. Here, the notion of a wrestling continuum is useful, with sport at one end and theatre at the other. I argue that as an event, wrestling is located closer to sport than to theatre. In the theatre what typically matters is a detachment from locality (the world outside the venue walls). We go to the theatre to be transported to different worlds, both real and imagined. However, the wrestling event is like sport, in that attachment to a specific location can really matter to how we experience the event and the stories contained within it. For example, Claire Warden notes how 'the space where wrestling occurs in a material and temporal sense – the room, the hall, the backyard – remains a vital facet of the wrestling experience' (2018, p.864). As well as the room where storytelling occurs impacting the event experience, geography also has a role. Warden explains how geographic locality is 'inherently important to the reception and attitudes of particular feuds and storylines' (2018, p.866). Brett Hart is again the go-to example to illustrate this point, with Warden citing the conflicting reception Hart elicited during his heel run in WWE during the late 1990s. Hart recalls for

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<sup>21</sup> In an interesting example of sports and wrestling crossover, Arsenal football team have previously entered onto the pitch at their stadium to WWE wrestler theme music (Stonehouse, 2021, n.p.).

example how WWE booker Vince McMahon pitched the angle cited by Warden, 'I would become the hottest heel in the WWF(E), but only in the United States' (Hart, 2007, p.412). The story Hart 'worked' during this period was premised on the idea that US fans no longer appreciated great wrestlers. Hart would therefore become increasingly resentful toward them, pitting US fans against those from his native Canada and Europe.<sup>22</sup> This story concluded in November 1997 with the infamous 'Montreal Screw Job' where Bret was legitimately ('shoot') cheated out of the WWE championship by owner Vince McMahon in front of his home crowd. Warden highlights the role of geography again here, how 'that this occurred in Hart's backyard, rather than in America, added significantly to the storyline' (2018, p. 865–6). In relation to the same storyline but focusing on audiences Aaron J. Petten notes how the 'beliefs, values, and outlooks' of specific audience's shape not just reception of wrestling characters, but also how wrestlers behave (Petten, 2010, p.445). The Hart persona in this example, was always a babyface in Canada and Europe, regardless how the character was portrayed on TV. What this suggests, is that wrestling characters are not only defined by their actions in the stories. In Hart's case, no matter how despicable he behaved in the ring, his storyline actions were always trumped by his Canadian nationality and the high regard his home fans held him. This case also throws into question, who exactly is in control of the storytelling that happens in wrestling.

In broader terms, the telling of stories in professional wrestling often draws on the specific cultural profile of the region an event is situated in. A choice of venue or location can also express ideas and values beyond themes of nationality like that cited above. Understanding wrestling storytelling therefore also requires an awareness of, as Warden puts it, how 'space and place serve as essential contexts for the reception, efficacy, and attributes of professional wrestling matches.' (Warden, 2018, p.864). This applies doubly for independent promotions, which are often bound to one specific locality, as opposed to mainstream ones operating nationally and internationally. In my findings, for

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<sup>22</sup> Bret Hart's Brother-in-Law and on-screen ally Davey Boy Smith was British, which meant through this storyline most UK fans continued to treat them as heroes.

example, one wrestling promoter told me he sees storytelling as bound to the bricks and mortar of the venue and the city where his promotion is located. It is this attachment to the place and people that gives independent wrestling an underlying reality, one that is often absent from traditional theatre. As he put it, storytelling becomes ‘a piece of acetate that you draw the “angle” onto and lay it over the real stuff’ (Bevan, 2020). Another promoter echoed this, telling me how ‘you probably don’t come to a show unless you’re jumping on a train with the same friends who you always come with, or in the car, or going to the same pub before the show’ (Kirby, 2020). Statements like these illustrate how the storytelling is often interwoven into the lived experiences of those that attend, take part in and run wrestling events.

Without it, it simply does not work.



Figure 7: Cara Noir and Spike Trivet work and sell a submission hold.

**Interviewer:** *How important is storytelling to understanding wrestling?*

**Wrestler:** *Well storytelling is wrestling, professional wrestling. Without it, it's amateur wrestling. It's combat. It's not performance. I think that wrestling without stories is a fixed fight, and that's not the allure of wrestling.*

**Wrestler:** *People want to be taken on a journey and in this kind of like micro-moment of matches, they want a kind of experience a mini-Rocky film, you know, they see the journey and the beginning. Where it started to where it's the overcoming, the triumph, or the not quite making it, not quite getting there. Storytelling is wrestling. And without it, it simply does not work. (Dawkins, 2020)*

The 'allure of wrestling' is multi-faceted, but at the crux of it, is storytelling. Sport gives wrestling its event structure. Location adds important context and subtext and effects how the event is received by the audience. However, storytelling is also central to what happens in the ring, the wrestling itself. This raises the question, what are the different functions storytelling performs in wrestling events and matches? I believe it is the concepts of 'work' and 'shoot' that hold the key. Together, they enable wrestlers to blend elements of sport and theatre together into 'micro-moments' of wrestling, which are used to assemble coherent and entertaining narratives. The wrestler in my interview is unequivocal in how he sees the function of storytelling in his work: 'storytelling is wrestling' and without storytelling, 'it simply does not work' (Dawkins, 2021). This is a powerful statement suggesting a vital function, i.e., that without it, it does not work. This testimony further highlights two key functions: storytelling as a means of differentiating between 'real and 'performed' and storytelling as both plot and narrative.



Figure 8: Wrestlers Charli Evans, Kanji and the match referee pose for a pre-match photo. This is not typical; it was staged in this instance to highlight that this match would emphasise the sport of wrestling.

In exploring the function of storytelling, how wrestling matches use sport remains essential.

Storytelling, as my interviewee suggests, acts as the separating line between professional wrestling and competitive combat sports like MMA. Wrestling is a worked performance, not merely a ‘fixed fight’ or shoot (Dawkins, 2021). For this wrestler, wrestling is not a fight with the outcome determined in advance; it is something else. It requires the requisite skills and physical attributes of sport, but also artistry, theatricality and the ability to create stories. Wrestling’s fixed nature invites comparison to theatre, justifying the work done in this area, but fundamentally wrestling is sport-inspired, regardless of how far it stretches beyond competitive sport. While significant secondary material on professional wrestling comes from media, popular culture, theatre and performance studies, sport is often absent. This is a point of contention, especially among those who have wrestled. Laurence De Garis for example notes how writing about wrestling ‘has stripped the performance of any vestige of “sport” whether it be “fake sport,” “trash sport,” or otherwise’ (2005, p.193).

By ignoring sport there is a danger of misunderstanding the function of storytelling. In his book, *Wrestling in Britain: Sporting Entertainments, Celebrity and Audiences* (2018), Benjamin Litherland proposes the idea that wrestling can be read as an 'enduring possibility for sport' (2018, p.3). This perhaps suggests that 'real' sport is at far greater risk of becoming 'fake' sport, i.e., wrestling, than we might initially imagine. In stating the importance of the relationship between sport and wrestling, Litherland notes how 'studying professional wrestling confronts some of the key tensions and questions about what sport is' (2018, p.3). I would argue this is because wrestling uses storytelling. It is not my goal to shine a lens on sport. However, recognising the inherent drama of sport, its appeal to supporters, its cultural place in the lives of people, is important to understanding the function played by storytelling in wrestling. For Litherland, to read professional wrestling without sport, 'risks taking sport, and for that matter theatre, to be an unchanging, natural phenomenon' (2018, p.3). Storytelling both separates and brings together theatre and sport and concepts like 'work' and 'shoot' help to navigate this.

Despite this central role played by sport, professional wrestling is surprisingly under-conceptualised in scholarship on the subject. Given that scholars such as Tim L. Elcombe note how sport is 'at its core aesthetic', this feels like an oversight (2012, p.214). Elcombe argues that 'we are drawn to it because of its ability to deepen the meaningfulness of our experience, to engage us fully and illuminate our embodied possibilities and limitations' (2012, p.214). This aesthetic, with meaning linked to our embodied experience of the world fits wrestling well. Enabled by the form's storytelling conventions, wrestling presents us with gripping contests which pit the ultimate athletes against each other. Wrestlers after all are capable of breath-taking acts of strength, resilience and courage. Drama in sport is what Elcombe calls 'a form of imaginative social communication through the use of intentional and bounded bodily movements exploring the human limits and possibilities within space and time' (2012, p.214). This is an accurate definition of wrestling's in-ring action. R. Scott Kretchmar, another in the field of Sports Philosophy, has articulated the relationship between sport and storytelling, seeing how the 'unmissable semantic, structural, and cultural kinship exists

between' the two (2017, p.56). He adds, how sporting tropes around athletic success and failure, render all sports, 'story-friendly' (2017, p.56). On wrestling specifically, Litherland suggests that it is in many ways 'a perfect sport, offering narratives of competition combined with exceptional physical prowess, bodily control, speed and strength' (2018, p.4). However, framing sport as *only* drama is not without issue. Lev Kreft notes with caution that while 'there is enough reason to compare sport with theatre', it is critical to bear in mind that 'sport is not mimetic and not pretence' (2012, p.228).

So, what exactly is wrestling if not sport? Broderick Chow offers a succinct explanation, describing a wrestling match as the 'theatricalization of an athletic contest' (Chow, 2017, p.151). The

construction of the athletic contest does not mimic sport, nor would I argue does it just exaggerate it, rather it uses it to create something entirely distinct. Sport retains a critical function in wrestling match-storytelling in that it provides the plot i.e., the attacks, holds, sequences and moves. It is also visible throughout wrestling's pageantry and stagecraft, i.e., referees, rules, commentators etc.

Storytelling then works to render these sporting elements coherent, logical, believable and entertaining. I would suggest then that wrestling takes elements of 'sport' and 'works' them through acts of storytelling. Submission holds like the rear-naked choke occur in MMA and professional wrestling, but in the latter, the hold is a plot element where the shoot effect (suffocation) is simultaneously masked and exaggerated, giving the appearance of suffocation. In this instance, storytelling works to make the performance of the wrestling sufficiently authentic but also to keep it sufficiently *inauthentic*, in other words from becoming too real.

Wrestling's relationship to sport goes beyond the physical language used to create the 'micro-moments' (Dawkins, 2021). Storytelling also packages the performances together for the audience. Jonathan Gottschall notes that 'pro wrestling is pure fiction, but it only exaggerates what we find in legitimate sports broadcasting' (2012, p.13). While I contest the term 'pure fiction' and claiming any

sports broadcast as 'legitimate'<sup>23</sup> feels tenuous, Gottschall's emphasis on exaggeration holds true. Not only are individual holds and attacks exaggerated, but this hyperbole also encompasses how wrestling is narrated and analysed by announcers, commentators and pundits. In wrestling, roles also found in competitive sports are taken on by secondary performers, who become 'workers' just like the wrestlers. This is the 'work-shoot' dynamic at play, narrators telling the story as if it were a legitimate competitive sport. For storytelling purposes, wrestling borrows much from sport, but sport also borrows conventions from wrestling. For example, Gottschall notes how 'boxing promoters have long understood that fights don't attract fan interest (and dollars) unless they feature compelling personalities and back stories' (2012, p.12). The 'worked' story, I would suggest then, could be as fundamental to sport as it is to professional wrestling. Indeed, Litherland has even suggested that from the 1980s, 'shoot-sport', 'moved closer to a position historically occupied by wrestling' due to its use of broadcasting techniques like editing and camera angles (Litherland, 2018, p.152).

In the match, the sport that inspires wrestling is 'worked' into a narrative structure taken from other forms of storytelling. So, while sport is key to how a match is organised and presented, and the individual parts of the match (the moves), more conventional storytelling principles dictate how the match-story is told. In the second part of the wrestler's testimony, they give examples of the types of narrative common to wrestling match-stories. Here they recognise the function of storytelling as engaging the audience in the match-story. For example, telling me 'people want to be taken on a journey' (Dawkins, 2021). Another wrestler I interviewed explained this using established storytelling theory, with the idea of a story mountain, containing 'introduction, build up, problem, main event, resolution' (Jones, 2022). It is worth noting here how such structures evoke other ways of breaking down narrative. Common examples included formular like Freytag's Pyramid (exposition,

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<sup>23</sup> Given wrestling broadcasting originated alongside 'legitimate sports broadcasting', there is a case to be made that those sports broadcasters merely dilute storytelling techniques and conventions first established by its illegitimate sibling professional wrestling.

complications, climax, falling action, catastrophe) for example' (Yorke, 2013, p.36). For the wrestlers, the basic structure of match-stories is largely unchanged, a simple template that offers near-endless possibilities for different types of match-stories. This is further evidence of the fundamental relationship between wrestling and other genres of storytelling. The second interviewee notes, 'wrestling is not unique in terms of storytelling, that's what I try to tell people, it's actually got all the tropes of traditional storytelling that you get in children's fiction, that you get in films, that you get in theatre' (Jones, 2022). Both interviewees point to cinema to illustrate their thoughts on storytelling. The second wrestler using a fight scene between Star Wars Franchise characters Obi-Wan Kenobi and Darth Vader, noting how this contained 'exactly the same beats as you'd get in a wrestling match' (Jones, 2022). In their example the babyface (Obi-Wan) is placed in peril by the heel (Darth Vader), before a big come back leading to victory. Alternatively, the first wrestler, uses a sports film, suggesting audiences 'want to kind of experience a mini-Rocky film' (Dawkins, 2021). While this serves to further highlight the status of wrestling as both sporting and theatrical in inspiration, the point is the same, storytelling is functioning to make the wrestling match entertaining for the audience. The audience want the wrestlers to go on a journey, they want setbacks, and to see characters either overcome them or fail heroically. For the first wrestler, it is often the latter, about 'working your hardest and not quite getting there' (Dawkins, 2021).

As well as using 'work' and 'shoot' to tell the story of the sport of wrestling, storytelling works to set the tone and style of wrestling match-stories and wrestling events. To illustrate the complexity of this relationship between sport and theatre I find it useful to imagine all wrestling as existing on a continuum. The continuum is comprised of ever-present ranges, for example between wrestling that is almost performance art and wrestling that presents an exacting representation of combat. Within this range exists a multiplicity of different companies, wrestlers, fans and promoters, each positioning themselves differently between the two poles. For example, UK Independent promotion Rev Pro is known for producing wrestling positioned toward sport. To convey this, their events regularly feature talent from Japan and the US, who are regarded for their sporting, technical, or

athletic acumen. Rev Pro also use presentation and structure to emphasise the sport of wrestling in their events. When attending a Rev Pro event in Stevenage in May 2022, I was struck by the efficiency of the show's production. Competitors were announced with minimal embellishment and the show moved efficiently from match-to-match. While all the matches had clear stories, and storytelling was visible throughout, the emphasis was firmly on drama derived from sport. The storytelling created by the wrestlers in the ring focused on moves and sequences, rather than elaborate back-stories, complicated plot or excessive gimmickry. Another interviewee strengthened my findings, noting how while excited to appear for Rev Pro, due to its reputation, they were apprehensive about the demands of the company's reputation for staging 'indie classics' (Seagroatt, 2022). This term, 'indie classic' is a kind of wrestler shorthand for the high-work rate style sports-inspired match common to independent wrestling events. This wrestler describes themselves as someone located on the theatrical end of the continuum, and their anxiety appeared to stem from feeling at odds with Rev Pro's sporting bias.

### Telling stories



Figure 9: Gene Munny working 'blindfolded' in a 'gimmick' match, here 'work' is used for comedic effect.

Despite what I see as the intrinsic role of sport in professional wrestling, it is a cooperative creative act. The wrestling contest is fixed, and it is the fact that outcomes are pre-determined that gives it the capacity to tell stories. Consequently, wrestling becomes undeniably theatrical, and therefore must also, always be understood in relation to theatre as well as sport. Sharon Mazer writes that to study wrestling is to 'come to terms with the significance of a highly popular form as it intersects, exploits, and finally parodies the conventions of both sport and theatre' (Mazer, 1998, p.3). The closeness of the two, the theatrical and sporting, is often represented through hyphens, which have been used by scholars attempting to express this liminality. For example, portmanteaus like Chow, Laine and Warden's 'sport-art' (2016, p.6). Terms like this highlight the unruliness of wrestling, demonstrating how as a performance its precise status is difficult to pin down, at least not for anything other than a near-fall.<sup>24</sup> For Mazer, wrestling is undoubtedly both 'at once scripted, theatrical, fake, and improvised, performed, and real'; and 'a suspect sport and a marginal entertainment' (2020, pp. 6–7). Wrestling embraces all the worst excesses of the term theatrical. Borrowing from Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis's exploration of the theatrical, wrestling could be said to be unashamedly, 'illusory, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial and affected' (2003, p.2). It is this excessiveness that for Roland Barthes, the first to write in depth on wrestling, is the form's defining feature, leading him to famously describe wrestling as 'the spectacle of excess' (2005, p.23). Inescapable then when writing about wrestling is the question surrounding the pretence that the wrestling part, the bit happening in the ring, is real. I do not think this in fact matters, certainly it does not matter to wrestlers, promoters or fans. What *really* matters is doing the 'work', i.e., the pretence itself and how an illusion of reality is maintained, even in the most obviously theatricalised examples. Barthes, for example, notes of the audience at the events he attended in the 1950s:

The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all

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<sup>24</sup> A 'near-fall' is where a wrestler attempts a cover, but their opponent kicks out at 2, just in time to avoid the final count of 3 that ends the match. They are a key feature of match-stories, acting like punctuation in a sentence.

motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees. (Barthes, 2005, p.23)

To understand how these terms like 'kayfabe', 'work', and 'shoot' are active within wrestling's storytelling architecture requires the careful consideration of how storytellers navigate tensions between sport and theatre. Storytelling I argue is vital, in that it sustains and justifies the pretence that the performance we are watching is not entirely fictional. It is through the interplay of work and shoot that the audience suspends its disbelief and treats the bouts as 'real'(ish).<sup>25</sup> This often happens just long enough so that the performance doesn't fall apart before their eyes. It applies to wrestlers, matches and whole events. It is also applicable to elements like promos, commentary, referees, even the audience itself. In every instance, storytelling needs to do just enough to keep the performance going.

To describe how wrestling navigates tensions between 'sport-theatre' and 'work-shoot', wrestling has developed its own concept, 'kayfabe'. In my experience of creating wrestling performances, it is through the processes of 'work' that 'kayfabe' is generated. For example, two wrestlers might 'work' a match in a way that creates clear animosity between the combatants in front of the audience. The bout might start with sportsmanship, such as a respectful handshake. However, by the end of the fight, the two wrestlers have worked in such a way that it ends with one wrestler cheating, or attacking the other after the official match has concluded. What started as a simple match story is now more complex. As a promotor or booker, the job is then to use the concept of kayfabe to embellish and extend this narrative to sustain future bouts, engage the audience and ultimately profit from this new feud.

There have been multiple attempts to define 'kayfabe' by scholars. Scott Beekman keeps it simple, 'kayfabe' is 'the notion of keeping the business secret' (2006, p.40). Marion Wrenn's analysis

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<sup>25</sup> I return to this thorny topic throughout. For now, it is important to know that wrestling fans are invited to treat what they see as real, no matter how ludicrous, and they are not as such tricked into thinking it is real... Well, at least not all of it.

continues the emphasis on this secretive aspect of this practice, noting how it is ‘an industry-wide policy of disavowing wrestling’s fakery; its choreography was a public secret, but a secret none-the-less’ (2007, p.152). Certainly, secrecy was once central to ‘kayfabe’. However, since knowledge of wrestling’s innerworkings became widespread, focus shifted away from secrecy toward storytelling. For instance, Lucy Jones offers her own understanding of ‘kayfabe’ as ‘the pretence that the in-ring and backstage performances are genuine’ (2019, p.278). ‘Kayfabe’ therefore is collaborative. Wrestlers, referees, commentators, and audiences are all involved in the ‘kayfabe’, as co-creators, participating in collective storytelling. Another important aspect of ‘kayfabe’ is how it often extends beyond the wrestling event. In this context, ‘kayfabe’ becomes what Litherland describes as ‘the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into everyday life’ (2014, p.532). Therefore, in wrestling the everyday often becomes just a different stage on which to continue the performance. Reinhard, in simpler terms, offers that kayfabe is the “artificial reality surrounding professional wrestling” (2019, p31). It is ‘kayfabe’ that allows for the creation of multiple storyworlds, which revolve variously around wrestlers, wrestling events and wrestling promotions.

Wrestling storytelling is both sporting and theatrical, combining ‘shoot’ and ‘worked’ elements. Through ‘kayfabe’, this storytelling extends beyond the ring, creating multiple storyworlds. Situated within these worlds are the players: wrestlers, promoters and fans. One wrestler in my field work told me that professional wrestling storytelling is shaped by three agents: the wrestler, the promoter and the audience. Examining all three is vital for understanding *how* stories are told. While subsequent chapters unpack this more rigorously, an initial overview is helpful. First, there are the wrestlers, who are responsible for the match narrative. Wrestlers use the physical language of wrestling to convey the match-story to the audience. This is supported by various conventions, including vocalisation,<sup>26</sup> and generally follows established scenarios based on factors like the size of

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<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that not all professional wrestlers agree with in match vocalisation. One wrestler I interviewed told me they actively dislike the practice and believe the wrestler should let their wrestling do the talking. Others disagree, and often go as far as to narrate their actions mid-match.

the wrestlers, their experience, or their individual status within the storyworld. This is supported outside the match by short promotional speeches to the audience or directly to other wrestlers (in ring promos). These messages can also be filmed for distribution on social media or even take the form of a short written text, on Twitter for example. Then there are the promoters and bookers (sometimes roles performed separately, but often both held by one person). The promoter 'books' the matches that feature in the event and determines the results of each match. In terms of the match-story specifically, this role can include input on narrative and the overall plot. Generally, the promoter/booker is only concerned with long-term narrative, often attempting to create stories that unfold over multiple shows. Finally, there is the audience. The audience participates through the generation of atmosphere and reactions to the narrative and the plot of each match and each storyline. The audience performs specific actions such as booing, cheering and heckling during the match. This often supports the narrative, but sometimes their participation can be an attempt to shift or change the match-story or broader storyline.

Each actor (wrestler, promoter, audience) can affect wrestling storytelling in different ways. With multiple people engaged in storytelling, agency is distributed across the wrestling event. This leads to the idea that stories are co-created. The 'work' of storytelling in wrestling, is therefore never performed alone. 'Working' is always a collaborative act. For example, the wrestlers 'work' the crowd, trying to engage them in the match-story. Feeding back, through their own participation, the audience 'work' the match, sustaining its believability (often even when it is clearly unbelievable). The collective 'work' of audience and wrestler is collaborative, and even the most naïve spectator will spot the work for what it is, an invitation to join in the story. However, this affords the audience significant power, meaning there is a constant danger that they will resist the story and even work against it. Audience agency is exerted within the match-story, but also extends to the storytelling surrounding the match. The collective nature of this storytelling is one of its defining features, something that could be unique to wrestling. It embeds within wrestling a degree of spontaneity and improvisation that even the most-immersive theatre struggles to cultivate. For example, even the

bizarre practice of solo wrestling, such as wrestling an invisible opponent or a blow-up doll, which requires all collaborators, to work together. The example par excellence is a match created by the US promotion Game Changer Wrestling. It pitted two invisible wrestlers against each other, 'Invisible Man' and 'Invisible Stan'. The match is facilitated by referee Bryce Ramsberg, who delivers an extraordinary performance. The resulting match-story relies on co-creation and kayfabe more acutely than perhaps any other wrestling match. To be clear, there are no actual wrestlers physically present in the bout at any point. They are invisible. The match-story is therefore told entirely by the audience, referee, and if viewing the filmed documentation, the commentators. One highlight is when one of the invisible wrestlers is propelled over the venue's balcony, landing on the audience below, who all collapse in unison to the floor. It is a collective act of performance where the audience sold the move as kayfabe, but also 'worked' to protect the invisible wrestlers from serious harm. Other than the match being announced prior to the show, there is no rehearsal, certainly not from the audience, their participation is entirely spontaneous. Another example of this, but with a reversal of roles, is when wrestling takes place either by design, or by necessity, in an empty arena. Matches without an audience became common place during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In these matches, wrestlers create an imaginary live audience to perform to. WWE during this 'pandemic-era' created some particularly bizarre examples of matches with no audience.<sup>27</sup> As co-creators, audiences can directly affect the match narrative during the performance. The role of the audience is often heightened at independent wrestling events, as the crowd is closer in proximity and fewer in number. This often causes more one-on-one interactions between wrestler and fans. For example, it is not uncommon to see wrestlers sit on fans laps,<sup>28</sup> drink from fans

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<sup>27</sup> For example, during this period WWE staged their annual showcase Wrestle Mania at their training facility without an audience. Across two nights they staged a 'Boneyard match', set in a graveyard and a 'Firefly Fun House', between John Cena and Bray Wyatt. Both were highly cinematic, making use of the filmed nature of the show to include special effects. The Firefly Fun Match was particularly rich in performance terms, and included Cena being transported through various moments from wrestling history.

<sup>28</sup> In fact, prior to commencing my doctoral research at Loughborough University, Wrestling Resurgence were invited to stage a show at the University. In attendance that evening was the head of school and my would-be supervisor, front row. To my alarm, at one point during a particularly anarchic brawl, 6 foot plus wrestler Chris Brookes was launched at breakneck speed straight at the head of school, landing in his lap. Luckily, when recalling the moment post-show, I was reliably informed that the experience was like being 'brushed with a feather'.

beverages and for the wrestling action to spill out into the audience, and even out onto the street. Proximity and intimacy mean heckles are more audible and fans and wrestlers are more accessible, and there is greater potential for narrative shifts.<sup>29</sup>

In terms of the agency of the audience, Annette Hill, citing Stephen Coleman's work on reality TV, describes wrestling as a 'theatre of power' (2019, p.28). This central dynamic, between the audience and performer, for Hill, 'allows modalities of power to be seen and experienced in mediated and lived realities' (2019, p.28). Adding in the promoter role, the three levels of agency become a kind of battleground. Hill highlights this struggle, noting how 'promoters hold the power over wrestlers and their audience, but only to the extent that crowds fully engage with an event' (2019, p.28). This view of the wrestling event as a struggle between different agencies is shared by Litherland, Warden and Chow, who claim 'meaning is produced by the tussles and conflicts of those participating: wrestlers, promoters and audiences' (2020, p.120). While these readings are valid, I would add that in my experience, the language of 'tussles and conflicts' and Hill's attribution of power to the promoter, risks framing this co-creation as only confrontational. That confrontation occurs is true, especially in mainstream products like WWE that serve a very diverse fan. Here the values of highly engaged audiences often rub up against those of casual viewers. However, in my experience of independent wrestling, each agent (including the booker/promoter) are in fact pursuing a shared experience; everyone wants to work together to generate an exciting and engaging experience. So, while it is true that tussles and conflicts are fundamental parts of agency and reception, this can also be framed as a productive force that often enriches the experience for all.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, I recall attending a live show where a known Liverpool FC supporting heel wrestler utilised audience agency in a particularly skilful way. It was days after an unfortunate slip by then Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard cost his team the premier league title in a crunch fixture against rivals Chelsea. The audience, not fans of Liverpool FC, were joyfully serenading the heel wrestler with a football song that recalled and mocked Gerrard's famous slip. In response, after berating the crowd with various expletives, he turned, ran full speed toward his prone opponent, and proceeded to dramatically slip. This theatrical fall, which landed him flat on his arse, caused a huge roar from the audience who became unhinged with laughter. This co-created moment has become part of the history and mythology of the company where the event took places.

To understand this, we again require 'kayfabe', which Constantino Oliva and Gordon Calleja call wrestling's 'fictional frame' (2009, p.6). For me this is the most important aspect of the concept. I view 'kayfabe' as a kind of productive force that is generated around wrestling through the co-creative/co-authored work of storytelling. Oliva and Calleja suggest that 'professional wrestling is a borderline example of narrative: in fact, part of the story actually gets generated during the discourse' (2009, p.5.) In other words, the match not only tells the story it also produces 'changes and interpretations to it' (2009, p.5.). While this is perhaps unusual for more conventional scripted narrative, causing Oliva and Calleja to see wrestling more in terms of video games, it would come as little surprise to narrative scholars who study oral storytelling. To bring this back to storytelling events, this idea of a co-creative dynamic is an example of Wilson's assertion that 'telling and listening are not distinctly separate and discrete parts'; rather they are in fact 'fundamentally the same activity' (2014, p.130). In the wrestling match listening is something relatively untheorized. However, anecdotally wrestlers speak of 'wrestling with their ears open', which refers to the practice of first listening and then reacting to the audience's behaviour. When engaging in matches, wrestlers are taught to match the energy level of the audience. If an audience is tired or quiet, rather than shout or perform frantically, the wrestlers seek to attune their work to the level of the crowd. This often means slowing down first, then gradually build back up. This is just one way that the audience participate in the match.<sup>30</sup> Translating this to wrestling events, Hill notes how the audience create their own 'emotional performances' (2019, p.15). For example, booing and cheering, which 'help shape the inter-generic spaces of sports entertainment' (2019, p.15). Such sonic contributions make the audience a vital component of the event aesthetic.

The playful co-creation of the audience in independent wrestling events is one of the central appeals to attending these shows. Here, often, there is a general sense in which the audience partakes in the

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<sup>30</sup> This kind of sonic back and forth of action and reaction also often shapes the end of matches, whereby pro wrestlers will choreograph fast paced sequences of unexpected counters and spectacular near misses. The terminology here is also fascinating, wrestlers talk of 'pop bubbles' which is the phenomenon of audiences reacting in quick succession to densely choreographed action.

spirit of the event. However, in mainstream wrestling, with its higher profile, and often longer-term fan investment, the participation of the audience can sometimes be more problematic. This aspect of agency has drawn the attention of scholars attempting to deal with the dynamics at play in mainstream wrestling television shows. For example, how the live audience often troubles or outright rejects its participation within the story. Koh (2017), Ford (2016), and Phillips (2015) have all separately used the same WWE example, involving former-independent wrestler Daniel Bryan, to examine what happens when the audience reject and then attempt to change a story. Kohn terms this the 'commodified authentic' (2017, p.472). Koh's concept denotes how WWE took the authentic anger felt by fans in respect to the alleged mistreatment of Bryan and commodified it into a lucrative and entertaining storyline, which eventually led to him becoming WWE Champion. Being WWE, this is an extreme example of audience agency being co-opted. However, it does underscore a more general role of audience agency within both mainstream and independent wrestling. Like the wrestler wrestling with their ears open, the job of the booker and promoters is to read the reactions of the audience and create opportunities for participation.

Conclusion



Figure 10: Charli Evans locks in an arm bar forcing Kanji to tap out.

Storytelling is wrestling. Storytelling is what sets up the action, holds it aloft, and brings everything back together. The first wrestler cited in this chapter from my field work told me they see matches like episodes of the US sitcom *Seinfeld*, ‘you set everything up at the beginning, it may not make any sense, and then all the pay-off happens at the end’ (Dawkins, 2022). This they see as a reward to the audience, and that if people are paying attention, they are rewarded and feel smart when it all comes together. This I would suggest is applicable not only to matches, but to all aspects of successful wrestling storytelling. That it rewards close-attention, and that it often contains layers of meaning only accessible to those that know how to read between the ropes. To grapple with a subject as broad as storytelling is a challenging undertaking. In this chapter, like the analogy used by the wrestler, I have set up lots of different functions, theories, practices, conventions and examples of the wrestling art of storytelling. In the chapters that follow, these ideas will continue to build, and hopefully all will be paid off by the time it reaches a resolution. What is clear is that wrestling is a storytelling art, and that storytelling is a valuable lens for creating new knowledge about wrestling.

## CHAPTER TWO - A THEATRICAL ANCESTRY

Professional wrestlers are often gifted entertainers<sup>31</sup> and highly trained athletes who see storytelling as central to their art. The very best know the art of storytelling well, creating stories with their bodies, and their compelling personas, within clearly defined parameters (the wrestling event for example). Across this, they communicate in a rich physical language that thrills, amuses, and engages their audiences. Chapter One explored the pivotal role played by storytelling: wrestling storytellers know how to 'work' their audience and 'work' a good story. To learn these skills, wrestlers go to school, where they are trained by their peers, over one hundred years of knowledge passed from one generation of bodies to the next. I have always wondered: where does this capacity to entertain, to create drama, and to tell stories originate from? This chapter explores that question, and in seeking to answer it, claims that rather than existing as a detached, monolithic entity, professional wrestling is part of a global trans-disciplinary landscape of theatrical and physical practices that use the body to entertain and which dates to at least the late nineteenth century. Wrestling results from a kind of theatrical ancestry, part of a far-reaching and long-standing human concern for the performing body as a source of popular entertainment. Proposing ancestors to these bodies is the chapter's objective. How, for example, from the comic bodies of *commedia dell'arte*, there unfolds a lineage of body-centric popular entertainment that includes circus, acrobatics, physical comedy, popular theatre, music hall, silent film and theatrical wrestling. Inspired by this theatrical ancestry, and these storytelling bodies, the chapter arrives at the claim that placing wrestling and wrestlers within an expanded historiography, unlocks new ways for scholarship to think about wrestling practice and wrestler 'work' in the present that breaks with current monolithic conceptions.

The ideas behind this chapter were theorised at the end of the first UK COVID-19 lockdown in early autumn 2020. In addition to analysing literature on professional wrestling and related disciplines and

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<sup>31</sup> Often, they are not.

bringing in historic examples from the history of wrestling, the chapter also explores these ideas in relation to my own practice-informed research project 'Theatre of Wrestling' (2021). Conceived at the same time as the chapter, the two, in my mind, are inseparable. The practice element started when Arts Council England (ACE) reopened grant applications and were specifically seeking work that could be made and distributed under pandemic restrictions. 'Theatre of Wrestling' resulted in an anthology of films: three that restaged scenarios from wrestling histories (a strongman verses a lion; an open challenge contest; and a magic act gone wrong), supported by a video essay that located these histories in relation to recent independent wrestling. It is the three performances that feature here, each used to illuminate a relevant theme, they are represented primarily through photographic documentation but were also accessed as films via the Wrestling Resurgence YouTube Channel.<sup>32</sup> The three performances are set in the empty Y Theatre, Leicester's oldest (and subsequently now home to all Wrestling Resurgence live events). Each is performed on the stage, without a wrestling ring. While there is no audience, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the film shot, framed by the stage, using a locked off camera, creates a proscenium. This makes film an effective medium for capturing something that is intended to still privilege the physical audience, even if they are absent. The performances took place in a single day, with minimal rehearsal time. The team was limited: two assistants, a wrestler in the role of dramaturg and producer, a film director, film crew of five, a paramedic, a make-up artist, four highly trained professional wrestlers, and a professional magician.<sup>33</sup>

Originating in the personal space of reading and writing, the routines and habits that make up the typical PhD life, 'Theatre of Wrestling' makes for a unique case study. In taking my research and opening it up to invited collaborators, the project represented a shift in how I think about wrestling as a storytelling art, and how this art is shaped by its complicated past. Reimagined through physical performance, the ideas came to take on a whole new meaning, much of which I have endeavoured

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<sup>32</sup> For film link, see appendix i.

<sup>33</sup> Obviously.

to fold back into my writing. The examples taken from 'Theatre of Wrestling' are here to provide clear examples of how theatre history contributes directly to wrestling as a storytelling art.

### Exploring wrestling history

When commencing research into professional wrestling, I was surprised to find myself gravitating towards scholarship dealing with its history, particularly the period prior to the global rise of mainstream giants WWE and World Championship Wrestling (WCW) in the late 1980s and 1990s. This deep past was both alien and familiar. Offering insights that went beyond the material I encountered on late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century wrestling, it also suggested creative possibilities for new work. Mining these histories, specifically those pivotal moments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the sport of wrestling transitioned from a 'shoot' sport to a 'worked' hybrid, changed how I see my research and practice. By 'working' these histories, I find strength in looking back. Indeed, rethinking the past, I argue, helps locate independent wrestling and wrestlers within a broader landscape of marginalised entertainment traditions, ones that use the body as a method for telling stories and entertaining audiences. So, while WWE and other major mainstream companies are important (as demonstrated by several examples featured in this chapter), they are just a part, not the whole story, of wrestling.



Figure 11: Chris Brooks evokes the rich history of the chop with this devastating strike to Gene Munny.

This is not however *the* history chapter. It is not about chronicling historic events; others, such as Ben Litherland, Scott Beekman, and John Griffiths have provided that work, (see Griffiths, 2015; Litherland, 2014, 2018; Scott M. Beekman, 2006). Instead, I take an intuitive approach that is curatorial in spirit, arranging histories like objects to form a tableau. As such, I have been selective in how I gather material, this is justified by the strong autoethnographic impetus that runs through all my work. I travel back through time, move geographically, and dip in and out of varied histories, including the wrestling of WWE, Japan and the UK, as well as fields I take to be related, such as circus, popular theatre and physical culture. So, I offer a messy history, that journeys back and forth between different places, lenses, theories and practices. Holding all this together is the body. The body as a presence in history, one that performs its own history but often also, sometimes unconsciously, those of related theatre disciplines. The body shaped by multiple histories. Here, the bodies of wrestlers rub up against other bodies, from periods when forms like wrestling, bodybuilding, strongman and circus, were still embryonic, fluid and porous. What effect, for example, did being a part of Music Hall, fairground and circus backstage life have on wrestlers? Who

did they encounter there? What techniques did they share? Which ideas were stolen? The body in my estimation is a kind of physical record of this shared history, with memories recorded in the muscle tissue, visible in every repetitive act in the ring.



Figure 12: Independent wrestler Alexis Falcon playing legendary British Wrestler Big Daddy.

Walter Benjamin states in his famous essay on storytelling that 'memory creates a chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation' (2019, p.43). Memory in wrestling serves a pedagogical function whereby wrestling is taught and learnt by subjecting the body to various movement patterns and sequences. It is also important in creating a kind of intergenerational memory by which the traditions and conventions of a community (in this case wrestling) are recalled and retold over time. Repetition is similarly important, Benjamin tells us that

‘storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and thus art is lost when the stories are no longer retained’ (2019, p.43). Fumi Okiji’s work on storytelling in jazz features the concept of what he calls ‘retrospective collaboration’, whereby performers in the present, enter an unseen (though heard) dialogue with their forebearers (Okiji, 2017, p.72). Okiji’s work bridges Benjamin’s ideas on storytelling and my own hypothesis as to the importance of a wider theatrical historiography. Through the act of storytelling, do perhaps the wrestlers of today ‘retrospectively’ collaborate with those of the past? Further, Okiji notes how ‘to play jazz is to re-tell the story of the jazz tradition but to do so in one’s own voice’ (Okiji, 2017, p.73). In wrestling then, in each match-story, I would suggest that the bodies of the wrestlers re-tell the story of the wrestling tradition in their own way, in an embodied way. The work of this chapter takes Okiji’s idea, itself based on Benjamin, of understanding storytelling as ‘an intergenerational, accumulative effort in which we see a story continue to unfold with each new telling’ and uses it to understand wrestling as part of a shared theatrical ancestry (Okiji, 2017, p.70). An ancestry that wrestlers add transparent layers to, and in doing so, as with the musicians in Okiji’s work, are ‘collaborating with others (both contemporary and temporally distant)’ (2017, p.70). With this as impetus, I claim that the collaboration of wrestling occurs not only with wrestlers, be that in the present or the past, but that this collaboration occurs with those of different theatre traditions within a common ancestral chain. Okiji notes this ‘involves negotiating an ever-adjusting gravitational pull towards the tradition’ that includes the material and the collaborators, ‘those alive and those who have passed’ (Okiji, 2017, p.73). And I would also position the bookers, promoters of wrestling, and even perhaps the audience, as part of ‘endlessly evolving sites of expressive and cultural significance’ (Okiji, 2017, p.73) that this ancestry constitutes. To understand how wrestling is shaped by the wrestling bodies (and other theatrical bodies) of the past requires knowledge of the body and the idea of a kind of embodied transmission. This has been a project for performance studies, for example Diana Taylor’s work on the relationship between the ‘fixed’ archival knowledge of written texts, films and photographs, and the repertoire comprised of live performances (2003, p.16). Applying this complex and wide-ranging concern for embodiment to

combat-sport, Sarah Crews and P. Solomon Lennox's related work on boxing is useful. In the introduction to their book *Boxing and Performance: Memetic Hauntings* (Crews & Lennox, 2020), citing (Schneider 2011), in terms similar to those attached to storytelling, note how throughout the repetitive processes of sport, 'units of cultural information are passed on, again and again, until they transmute and take on a life of their own' (2020, pp. 1–2). It is through repeated acts of transmutation, carried out over periods of time, that a form is reshaped. Further, the bodies of those engaged in this process (wrestlers) come to embody the histories, practices, culture, knowledge and skills of the tradition they are training in. However, with a memetic practice like this, Crews and Lennox note how each new permutation continues to be 'haunted' by the past versions (2020, p.2). Repetition is key to unlocking this. Repetitive practices, they note, in terms similar to the performance and the training of professional wrestling 'demonstrate the potential for bodies and performance practices to be (re)shaped and (re)mattered' (2020, p.2). Broderick Chow reads in weightlifting similar processes, noting how in his example, repetitive training 'scripts a limited range of movements and bodily behaviours that must be repeated on a regular scheduled basis if progress is to be made' (Chow, 2015, p.31). Wrestling does this through the repetition of routines, moves and skills, such as repeatedly practicing how to bump (breakfall) in every training session. Through this process of repetition different aspects of wrestling performance culture, history and ideology become inscribed onto the body. It is this physical repetition that enables concepts like muscle memory. The result is a body built to perform specific tasks: falling or being slammed onto the ring canvas without compromising the head and neck (wrestling); correctly receive a heavy barbell overhead without pressing with the arms (weightlifting); or contorting the body into a seemingly impossibly tight space for an illusion like the body sawn in half trick (magic).

Repetition is not however only about practicing something and committing it to memory, it is also a process of reenactment. Again in using the example of weightlifting, Chow illustrates this by noting how every repetition is a performance of a 'historic moment, an encounter with the past that takes place in the site' of the body (Chow, 2015, p.31). For example, in performative acts like running the

ropes in wrestling, slipping on a banana skin in comedy, or striking a front double biceps pose in bodybuilding, all in some way evoke an encounter with a longer history. Interestingly, wrestling often re-enacts multiple historic moments within a single match performance, a wrestler might strike a pose one minute, then slip over comically, and finish it all off with a daring act of athleticism. This complexity is one reason why tracing these histories can be especially revealing. Noting the implications of this for storytelling, Chow suggests that wrestlers bodies 'enact a fictional drama' and that the body is the 'primary medium' (2016, p.145). As with storytelling, the same two dialogisms are crucial to the history of wrestling: between the real and fictional, and between the sporting and theatrical.

Roland 'The Guarantor' Barthes

The germination of the idea to bridge scholarship on the intersecting histories of wrestling, popular entertainment and physical culture, with the practice of the present-day wrestling came from rereading the work of French literary theorist Roland Barthes. Claire Warden declares Barthes's work 'foundational' to understanding professional wrestling (2020, p.150). Adding that Barthes is the 'guarantor for anyone in the scholarship of professional wrestling' (Warden, 2018, p.864). However, in my view, Barthes is too often air-dropped into scholarship *only* as the guarantor, rather than used to cast new light on what wrestling is now. This is not the case here. I hold Barthes as still vital to understanding the role of the body, the physical language of wrestling performance, the aesthetic of wrestling, the role of comedy and the art of wrestling storytelling (to name a few). In doing so, I claim that the multiple revaluations of Barthes I have undertaken, in the context of independent wrestling scholarship, represent a small but original contribution to knowledge.

To this chapter specifically, it is through Barthes that I permit myself to look back to the wrestling of his time (1950s), and back further, to traditions that predate its transition from 'shoot' sport to a 'worked' theatre. In 'The World of Wrestling', Barthes's single, but seminal, contribution to the field, he offers several connections between wrestling and older theatrical traditions. On the first page for

example he evokes 'the great solar spectacles: Greek drama and bullfights' that, like wrestling, he views as generating an 'emotion without reserve' (2005, p.23). Extending this, wrestling is often referred to as the oldest sport, which, according to John Griffiths, 'can be traced back to Babylonian and Egyptian societies' as well as the ancient Olympics of classical Greece (2015, p.39). Further, for Lisa Jones, wrestling is representative of a mode that 'precedes modern forms of dramatic storytelling' (2019, p.283). Following Roland Barthes, Jones notes how 'the slings and arrows of the misfortunes of people's everyday lives are writ large upon the stage of the pro-wrestling ring', and by sharing in them the audience participate in a kind of collective catharsis, 'just as witnessing the sorrows and tragedy of ancient spectacle did for the ancients' (2019, p.282). Going beyond sport then, Barthes evokes both drama and spectacle, conjuring up images of legendary gladiators engaged in breath-taking combat watched by thousands of bloodthirsty onlookers. The scene suitably set in terms of epic scaling, he then draws in closer by moving the aperture of historical survey to a more detailed level. Concentrating on the wrestlers' use of exaggeration and gesture (words of enduring significance to understanding wrestling), he observes how wrestling exudes a 'grandiloquence' comparable to an unspecified 'ancient theatre' (Barthes, 2005, p.23).

Grandiloquence is a most apt term for describing wrestling, capturing the pageantry and melodrama that continues to accompany it.

## Comic violence



Figure 13: The villainous Lykos Gym ‘drown’ Charles Crowley in a paddling pool filled with plastic balls.

One of the most detailed comparisons Roland Barthes offers is between the body of the wrestler and those of the Italian theatrical tradition *Commedia dell'arte*. Specifically, how the bodies perform a clearly defined moral role in each match-story, such as the hero or the villain.<sup>34</sup> In Barthes's estimation, wrestlers 'have a physique as peremptory as those of the characters of the *Commedia dell'arte*, who display in advance, in their costumes and attitudes, the future contents of their parts' (2005, p.25). Like the *Commedia dell'arte* troupes that toured Europe over 200 years ago, wrestling companies use well-established and endlessly repeatable scenario templates and character types to tell their stories (Peacock, 2013, p.59). This reading of wrestling in relation to *Commedia dell'arte* has, for the most part, largely remained unexplored since Barthes's writing. Claire Warden for example suggests in relation to this aspect of Barthes's analysis that 'such clear-cut characterisation feels faintly old-fashioned' (2018, p.871). While there is certainly an element of truth to this in terms

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<sup>34</sup> It is undoubtedly more complex than this but detail will gradually accumulate as the thesis progresses.

of the characters used in mainstream wrestling, I have found that clearly defined roles remain vital to the construction of match-stories. According to John Fiske, another area where Commedia dell'arte continues to stand up in relation to wrestling is as an 'institutionalised form of popular spectacle' which 'exists on the borderline of art and non-art (or life)' (Fiske in Wysocki & Call, 2019, p.130). This point, recognised by Barthes, is key to understanding both storytelling and wrestling, that it is a form of 'Human Comedy', underpinned by the 'nuances of passion' that all can relate to it (2005, p.26). Barthes states, 'it is at every turn during the fight, in each new situation, that the body of the wrestlers cast to the public the magical entertainment of a temperament which finds its natural expression in gesture.' (2005, p.25). Rereading Barthes in relation to Commedia dell'arte and related popular spectacles of the past opens wrestling up to different disciplines. For Barthes, and for this chapter, the connection between wrestling and past traditions, is in the diverse types of theatrical bodies central to them.



Figure 14: Clementine desperately attempts to 'resuscitate' the seemingly drowned Charles Crowley

From commedia unfolds a lineage of body-centric popular entertainment that includes circus, acrobatics, physical comedy, popular theatre, music hall, silent film and professional wrestling. It might not seem immediately obvious to those unfamiliar with wrestling, but the physical comedy of slapstick is fundamental to how it uses storytelling. Arguably, even at its most serious, the comic helps to engage and involve the audience in the match-story being told. Slapstick is present in the skills required, the timing, the content, the sounds, the physicality and even the athleticism, and, of course, the violence. Originating in Commedia dell'arte, the word slapstick is translated from the Italian term for lead character Arlecchino's wooden stick – his 'battacchio' (Peacock, 2013, p.62). Writing on slapstick in Commedia dell'arte, popular performance and comedy studies scholar Louise Peacock notes how 'the performer is perhaps not affected by pain in the usual ways' and that 'their

bodies appear capable of physical feats beyond the ability of ordinary everyday people' (Peacock, 2013, p.62). The parallels are immediately obvious, even in a match-story adopting a sporting tone, wrestlers clearly embody a relationship to pain that is different to that of ordinary people. Further parallels around pain and violence are present in how the audience experience the stories told in Commedia and in wrestling. For example, Peacock notes how in Commedia, 'the performance style highlights the importance of the threat of pain and the role played by anticipation in the audience's enjoyment of the performance of comic pain' (Peacock, 2013, p.63).

Another parallel between the two is around the use of scenarii as storytelling templates. Scenarios in commedia refer to basic plot outlines. The scenario is overseen by the 'capo-comico' who like bookers in modern professional wrestling, determine key aspects of the story and assign character roles within it. Within each Commedia scenario are a series of different devices called lazzi around which physical set pieces revolve. Peacock notes that these lazzi, which include categories such as 'comic violence', 'sadistic behaviour', 'social-class rebellion' and 'stupidity/inappropriate behaviour', typically 'revolved around the inflection of comic pain through beatings, trips and falls, either openly or through subterfuge' (Peacock, 2013, p.63). Moving this forward, Peacock observes how 'a lively slapstick tradition can be traced from Arlecchino battacchio, through Punch and Judy, through pantomime and through stage plays right to the present' (Peacock, 2013, p.62). She adds also that this chain of development is mirrored on screen, often taking the form of double acts, such as Laurel and Hardy, animated characters Tom & Jerry and British surrealists Reeves and Mortimer. As a predominantly partnered form, the comic double act is an especially interesting way of thinking about the dynamics at play between wrestlers in match-stories. For example, Pantalone and Arlecchino, who Peacock calls the 'seminal slapstick double act', invite comparisons with one of wrestling's most famous double acts, WWE owner Vince McMahon, and lead wrestler Stone Cold Steve Austin. This is a comparison worth exploring.

While Lazzi is not a term used in wrestling, Lazzi-like routines are visible throughout it and often provide a common formula for the storytelling contained within it. For example, the 'McMahon/Austin' storyline could be read as an elaborate 'social-class rebellion' lazzo that spanned several years and multiple events. Throughout the late 90s and early 2000s McMahon portrayed a maniacal caricature of his real-life self,<sup>35</sup> obsessed with making the on-screen and in-ring lives of his employees miserable.<sup>36</sup> Typically, the victims were the babyface wrestlers, with McMahon surrounding and supporting the heel wrestlers as proxies. Reading this back through *Commedia dell'arte*, I suggest McMahon as a modern-day Pantalone, who, to varying degrees depending on the context, is greedy, old, intelligent (ignorant) and/or lustful. For Arlecchino, read his nemesis, the babyface anti-hero, Stone Cold Steve Austin. Rather than playing a stooge,<sup>37</sup> Austin is more the calculating version of Arlecchino seen in certain *Commedia dell'arte* scenarii. In their wrestling versions, Austin generally ends up on top and, due to the violent world the two characters inhabit, gets to physically assault his employer. Read within the lazzo structure, the two wrestling characters entertained audiences at live events and on television, with different variants on the same central themes being played out. There are several standout scenarios from this period, including Austin holding a fake gun to McMahon's head and threatening to execute him on live television: Austin spraying McMahon with a truck full of cold beer, and assaulting him in his hospital room with a bedpan. In this final example, it is especially obvious to read parallels between this wrestling use of comic violence and the classic tooth pulling lazzo in which Arlecchino performs dentistry on the helpless Pantalone (Peacock, 2013, p.67).

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<sup>35</sup> How close the onscreen representation of McMahan is to the real-life businessman is an enduring topic of discussion among wrestling fans.

<sup>36</sup> This scenario of an out-of-control authority figure was so successful, it endures as a common trope in both mainstream and independent wrestling.

<sup>37</sup> There are in fact some interesting instances where they did explore this dynamic during a heel fated Austin heel turn experiment in the early 2000s and I would also suggest that Mick Foley's corporate Mankind persona might be included in this conversation as a more stooge-like Arlecchino.



Figure 15: Object-based violence is a common motif in independent professional wrestling. For example, in Wrestling Resurgence's signature Artcore Match. Here Drag King Wrestler Big Dick Confidence is struck over the head with a painting canvas.

Connecting wrestling with slapstick invites consideration of the influence played by cinema in shaping wrestling storytelling. Luke Stadel, researching wrestling and cinema between 1892–1911, argues that wrestling's use of physical entertainment, and slapstick conventions, endeared it to early film. Noting how 'the same kind of anarchic energy persist in wrestling through its activation of the performative tropes and systems of signification of cartoons and slapstick comedy' (2013, p.358). This argument suggests that not only did wrestling become worked, due to influences from the theatre world, 'films themselves can also be seen as beginning to shape professional wrestling as a mediated practice' (2013, p.345). Like slapstick, wrestling and boxing, lent themselves to the cameras of early film in that they 'largely adhere, in both content and length, to dominant representational norms of the period', such as privileging a performance spectacle over any sense of authenticity (2013, p.349). Stadel claims that it was wrestling's mediation through film that became the catalyst for its transformation from competitive sport to theatricalised athletic contests for the screen. Noting that 'the birth of the worked style in the wrestling industry also bears similarities to the larger cinematic practices of physical violence that were popular during the 1910s and 1920s'

(2013, p.358). Further, he adds that 'wrestling's affinity for spectacle is less an essential characteristic than a historically specific formal condition', which he claims results from its encounter with cinema (2013, p.343). This began with the practice of re-enacting actual competitive bouts of wrestling and boxing for the camera. However, such re-enactments almost immediately departed from 'authentic' sport. This led to an increasing theatricality, such as the use of painted colosseum backdrops, extras to play the role of spectators, and the dramatisation of the contests (2013, p.348). These films thus became a genre in their own right, 'emphasizing physical display over the actuality claim of real contests' and 'an aesthetic that is presentational rather than representational' (Stadel, 2013, p.349). If as Stadel claims, this is 'the birth of the worked style in the wrestling industry', and it is indicative of broader values of this crucial historic moment, then wrestling can be read as one of many 'practices of physical violence' popular at the time (2013, p.358). Sports like wrestling and boxing appear to have played a key part of early cinema popularity, and concurrently cinema can be said to have shifted the presentation of these sporting spectacles.

#### The Magnificent Gisele... and her assistant Bob in 'Magic Death Match'



Figure 16: 'Theatre of Wrestling' film artwork.

The first performance of the 'Theatre of Wrestling' series to be considered in relation to the work of this chapter is titled 'Magic Death Match', unlike the other two performances, this story was not a direct exploration of wrestling history, but instead an experiment in the crossovers between different potentially related genres – part Commedia dell'arte, part theatrical magic, but also the horror theatre of the Grand-Guignol. Creatively, the objective was to understand the artistic influences present in recent experimental independent wrestling. Two important themes emerged when I began planning this performance: object-based violence and the idea of illusion. In relation to wrestling, despite the centrality of violence and slapstick throughout its history, especially in its cinematic presentation, to connect wrestling with Grand-Guignol is admittedly a leap, but it is one worth making.



*Figure 17: Bob attempts to cut the Magnificent Gisele in two!*

'Magic Death Match' is the story of a double act gone wrong. Performing the story, we have the magician 'The Magnificent' Gisele, and her assistant, simply known as 'Bob'. Briefly, the plot is Gisele performing violent magic acts on Bob, such as pulling an object from inside his ear. There is a clear conflict in the relationship, Bob has had enough of being the recipient of Gisele's 'tricks'. It reaches a boiling point when Gisele proposes to saw Bob in half. The assistant refuses, and the performance

descends into a blend of orthodox wrestling and unorthodox magic, such as Gisele forcing a trick sword down Bob's throat. It is in the uncomfortable rendering of magic tricks into violent acts, and the wrestling selling of the magical acts as painful, that the Grand-Guignol frame of reference is most obvious. The piece ends, for example, with Gisele screaming in pain as Bob separates her sawn body into two halves.

'Magic Death Match' invites comparison between wrestling and Grand-Guignol theatre. In terms of the role of the wrestling bodies, the decision to use theatre magic, and have the wrestler's portray magicians, is intended to show how both highly embodied performance arts use storytelling in similar ways. Charles Rolfe, for example, sees the magician in terms not unlike the wrestler, such as how the magical figure is presented to the audience in a way that 'embodies theoretical and practical forms of knowledge' (2016, p.577). The wrestler and the magician also converge around the idea of 'work' (in the wrestling sense of the term). For example, Rolfe describes how during magic acts 'magicians work – deliberately, automatically – to short-circuit participant-spectator's capacity for thinking critically' (2016, p.577). In performance terms, magicians and wrestlers practice a range of commands, use misdirection and sleights of hand to influence the experience of the audience. These techniques facilitate the suspension of disbelief, immersing the audience in the storytelling of the performance. In 'Magic Death Match', the wrestling-magicians blend both disciplines. Wrestling and magic also both use secretive knowledge, such as planting workers in the audience, fabricating gimmicked objects and sleights of hand to mask key actions. They also both use storytelling devices, including characters, plot, costume and stagecraft.



Figure 18: wrestlers Gisele Shaw and Gene Munny practice a magic trick backstage with a professional magician.

The decision to reference Grand-Guignol was made to bring magic and wrestling together. Setting the performance in the horror theatre genre allowed the performers to subvert the magic elements. Freed from the constraints of traditional magic acts, the wrestlers were able to incorporate wrestling violence, much of which was comedic. Grand-Guignol in this regard provided a storytelling template. Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson in an in-depth study of Grand-Guignol note how the company's plays were demonstrative of 'a masterful control of dramatic pace and concision' (2000, p.266). Further, that the company promoted the 'innovative use of stage technologies, and an ensemble of highly versatile and disciplined performers', both of which resonates with the ethos of the 'Theatre of Wrestling' project (2000, p.266). In drawing on a variety of artistic influences, from avant-garde naturalism, expressionism, and 'the subversive violence of surrealism', Grand-Guignol would set the template for a plethora of different storytelling genres, having a 'tangible impact' on thriller and horror movies (2000, p.266). Like the wrestling event, an evening of Grand-Guignol entertainment was a concisely structured affair, typically made up of between four to six distinct plays. Working to the narrow confines of the theatre where the plays took place, Hand and Wilson note how the stagecraft of Grand-Guignol was designed in a way that 'ensured that no member of the audience

felt far from the performers, and vice-versa' (2000, p.268). Proximity is also a major appeal of independent wrestling, which takes place in similarly sized venues. Like professional wrestling, Grand-Guignol had its detractors among the cultural establishment, who dismissed any consideration of its methods on grounds of popularity. However, like wrestling, Hand and Wilson note that for its promoters, this meant they could 'hide it behind a veil of secrecy and mystique' (2000, p.268).

Consideration of Grand-Guignol is of value, not to all professional wrestling, but rather to a niche enclave of the genre. In current experimental wrestling,<sup>38</sup> it is possible to see traces of Grand-Guignol, especially in the way it tells stories and what it tells stories about. For example, Hand and Wilson note that in Grand-Guignol, 'the performer must tread the very thin line that separates horror from comedy' (2000, p.268). This is of similar concern to the wrestler, the action must look convincing, but not so realistic to appear real. Most people attending wrestling events do not actually want to see someone hurt, they rather seek what Barthes calls the 'exhibition of suffering' (Barthes, 2005, p.27). Another benefit of comparing wrestling and Grand-Guignol is in understanding the relationship between storytelling and audience. For example, key to Grand-Guignol was 'monopolizing on what the audience thinks it is seeing, through a mixture of suggestion and anticipation;' and in doing so draw on their 'willing suspension of disbelief (2000, p.271).' As a result, 'the spectators are active participants implicated in the very creation of effect and meaning' (2000, p.271). Audiences in wrestling know that attacks are 'worked', and although these attacks are painful, it is the conscious choice of the audience to amplify the effect of a violence. Audience and wrestler work together to make 'work' meaningful.

Grand-Guignol, like the Commedia dell'arte that pre-dated it, is one example of how wrestling as a popular entertainment is connected to the theatre of the past. 'Magic Death Match' puts research

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<sup>38</sup> Specifically, the work of now defunct wrestler-led collective Schadenfreude and Friends, is an important bridge between Grand-Guignol and the Magic Death Match performance. Active briefly, even by independent wrestling standards, the company gained a cult-like following and reputation for its unorthodox wrestling storytelling that often resulted in one more wrestler being 'murdered' in the ring, methods of which included stabbing and gunshots, with fake blood plentiful.

into practice, exploring what happens when these histories are confronted in a modern setting with contemporary performers. In a reversal of roles that is pure professional wrestling, 'Magic Death Match' concludes not with the assistant sawn in half, but the magician herself. As the theatre curtain closes on the performance, the two halves of the magician are wheeled away and her screams of pain echo around the empty theatre.

### Unruly music halls

Connecting wrestling with Commedia dell'arte and Grand-Guignol requires a leap of imagination. However, there are also more tangible connections to explore. In his history of wrestling in Britain, Litherland argues that 'professional wrestling and early cinema progressed from a shared history of clowning and comedy on the variety and music hall stage' (Litherland, 2018). Music Hall, as both a historic fact of wrestling's past, and as a set of ideas, conventions and sensibilities, has become vital to how I see wrestling today. John Griffiths notes how 'the synergy between wrestling and the entertainment world has been reinforced by the fact that wrestling bouts often took place in theatres and music-halls, and wrestlers appeared in theatrical productions, music hall performance, and subsequently moving film' (2015, p.41). Further, Litherland notes how wrestling entertainments at the end of the nineteenth and the start of twentieth centuries, were 'celebrated attractions of the music hall stage', and that they 'continued older legacies of the stage which has been resisted during the genesis of the sporting field' (2018, p.75). Nicholas Till describes how in the 1840s music halls developed 'as a means of organising and commercialising the more informal entertainment' of taverns, concert rooms, singing saloons and pubs, becoming vitally important places for the urban population to spend their leisure time (Till, 2004, p.5). Further, supporting this connection, Keith Gregson and Mike Huggins postulate a close connection between sport and music hall, noting that the connection was surprisingly stronger between the two than between music hall and 'legitimate' theatre (2007, p.85).

The period during which wrestling inhabited the music hall has generated substantial interest from scholars. Consequently, evidence can be gathered around how the music hall space shapes wrestling. Litherland has argued that the music hall stage between 1880–1910 was key to the performative violence wrestling went on to adopt (Litherland, 2018, p.95). He locates professional wrestling within a genealogy of entertainment rooted in the music hall tradition. This was perpetuated by the continued role of showpeople in promoting the form. As it evolved, wrestling retained much of the music hall spirit, for example how ‘dominant systems and everyday life were critiqued’ (Litherland, 2018, p.95). That wrestling often reflects, and parodies, the popular culture of the day, appears to stem from its history in the music hall. This influence endures, with Annette Hill noting that wrestling that it still ‘borrows heavily from theatre, including the historical antecedents of music hall and variety’ (2019, p.21).



Figure 19: Wrestler Jayde, performing as former-UK Prime minister Boris Johnson, applies a headlock to Alexis Falcon playing Big Daddy

Part of wrestling’s apparent appeal to music hall promoters and their audience were the bodies that competed in it, and the erotics that surrounded them. Here, Litherland notes how wrestling was ‘no

different' to the other kinds of professional bodies that performed in music hall, fairgrounds, carnivals and circuses, such as those of the excessively large or small. He also sees this as evidence for the resistance wrestling would face from the cultural establishment, that it openly embraced the body as a key pleasure (Litherland, 2018, p.98). With body-based attractions finding success on the stage, the sport of wrestling increasingly became an art of entertainment.

This relationship between wrestling and the stage continued to develop throughout the century and would occur in a variety of geographies. Claire Warden notes that wrestling of this time exhibits a 'transnational character', encompassing multiple territories beyond the UK and the USA (2020, p.150). Gillian Arrighi's work on the embodied traditions such as circus and sumo wrestling during the same period is also indicative of this. Examining Sumo wrestling in Australian and New Zealand circuses, Arrighi understands those spaces, which I would suggest is applicable to wrestling, 'as a politically dynamic site where performative transnational encounters were nurtured' (2012, p.266). For example, she notes how by booking an exotic attraction like Japanese Sumo wrestlers, circus organisers were tapping into the growing popularity of professional wrestling. The 'theatricalised wrestling competition' offered by sumo, and wrestling, reflected the public's enthusiasm for these kinds of embodied 'sport-inspired performances' (2012, p.267) and 'extended the burgeoning relationship between the circus and competitive sport, while at the same time it dovetailed with the contemporary fascination for physical culture' (2012, p.267). Though wrestling is not explicitly Arrighi's focus, her work suggests a wide-reaching theatrical ancestry encompassing myriad embodied traditions. Wrestling, like circus, sumo and strongman, as well as various other embodied traditions, I argue can be read as part of a shared historical moment, characterised by what Arrighi calls the 'increasing slippage between the sporting area and the circus ring' (Arrighi, 2012, p.267). It is not just a question of occupying a historic moment; in concerning herself with 'the performance parallels between circus and sumo' and using historic records to support her claims, Arrighi finds that audiences 'responded to the performances as a theatricalized show, embedded with qualities essential to the circus such as comedy, practiced dexterity and a high level of physical skill' (2012,

p.268). The final point here, is the idea that the bodies of the circus, of physical culture, and of popular entertainment, participate in a productive state of 'flux' (2012, p.271). As a result, we see embodied performance forms that are 'constantly seeking new aesthetic and materialist trajectories' (2012, p.271). This moment of sumo wrestling intersecting with circus entertainment, may be small, but it is also complex, and speaks to professional wrestling in interesting ways.

#### A variety of entertainment

Wrestling, I argue, continues to embody the spirit of the music hall; however, it is also possible to point to more tangible crossovers. For example, an enduring legacy of music hall, still critical to wrestling events today is what Oliver Double calls the logic of a 'nicely balanced bill – with variety in the true sense' (2012, p.21). For Litherland, variety was a key part of early professional wrestling shows, with promoters 'incorporating different performance styles and traditions into matches' (2018, p.100). Variety remains vital, in my estimation, to successful wrestling events, where the card is composed in a way that offers something for everyone's wrestling tastes and each match stands out as a unique story. Across one show, matches can range from absurd comedy farces, bloody death bouts and technical masterpieces. In my view, the wrestling show should be a kind of mix of everything that is possible within the genre. As well as a focus on offering a variety of entertainments, many terms and conventions also originate in the music hall. For example, there is the particularly interesting professional wrestling phrase 'to get over'. In the professional wrestling vernacular 'to get over' is to win the favour of the audience. For example, 'getting over' might be attributed to a specific persona, such as in the statement 'wrestler x is really over with the Resurgence audience'. In fact, Double notes how the phrase comes from music hall, where without microphones and PA systems, 'getting over' referred to the need to make the audience literally hear what the performer is saying or singing. Here, the performer 'somehow projects the self out over the floodlights' (2012, p.127). The two meanings and uses of the word are by and large the same, they are used in both contexts to infer a successful reaction to the artist's act. To get over is not merely to be heard, it is about making a connection with everyone in the room. Professional wrestlers also use

the expression to refer to specific components within their matches, for example moves and spots they do every show, which they work hard to 'get over' with the crowd.

### Munny Martino 'An Open Challenge'



Figure 20: 'Theatre of Wrestling' film artwork

The second performance in the 'Theatre of Wrestling' anthology is inspired by wrestling history, adopting a formula that persists in the modern era – an open challenge match. While the exact origins of the challenge scenario are difficult to trace precisely, on the music hall stage Litherland locates its arrival to around the 1890s and early 1900s. He notes that 'challenge matches were a feature of earlier fairground booths' and remained popular well into the twentieth century (2018, p.57). The open challenge is part-trick, part-storytelling, used for various purposes from the obviously commercial, such as fleecing unwitting audience members, through to employment as a promotional tactic, to build interest and celebrity. In today's wrestling, the open challenge now primarily serves a storytelling function, for example a way of introducing or bringing back a character to a promotion or to create a new angle.

The historic version of the open challenge, employed on the music hall stage, is the starting point for this new interpretation, one that strips the scenario back to something closer to what it was originally designed for. Open challenges traditionally involved audience members, who would pay for the opportunity to wrestle against an experienced professional. If they could survive long enough, prize money would be awarded. However, the enterprising proto-wrestling-promoters of this era found their audience members lacking in sufficient skill or overcome by sufficient alcohol; to be entertaining participants. So instead, they planted trained wrestlers within the unsuspecting crowd, often for entertainment, or to make it appear possible to beat the ‘real’ wrestler. Interestingly for storytelling, this formula was open to subversion, and it became a recurring feature for aspiring professional wrestlers to hide in the auditorium. They would then dramatically reveal themselves, often shedding their clothes to reveal muscular bodies.



Figure 21: a sleazy-looking music hall promoter introduces his prize fighter Munny Martinez and issues an ‘open’ challenge to an unseen audience.

Inspired by this, we created a modern interpretation. ‘Munny Martinez: An Open Challenge’ is performed by independent professional wrestlers Richard Summers-Calvert, who performs under the persona Mr. Charles Crowley, and Paddy Townley, who wrestles as Gene Munny. Charles

Crowley plays the role of an unnamed, unscrupulous, music hall promoter,<sup>39</sup> as well as three characters planted in the audience, who would accept the open challenge. Alongside Crowley is Gene Munny, playing a character called 'The Ultimate Bruiser' Munny Martino.

Central to the performance is an attempt to express in practice the kind of memetic process of transmission described earlier in this chapter. The process through which wrestling could be claimed to have developed. The performance is an open challenge, but with each new challenger (three in total), the performers move through professional wrestling history. The use of the repetitive format of an open challenge provides the structure that holds the performance together as a cohesive story.

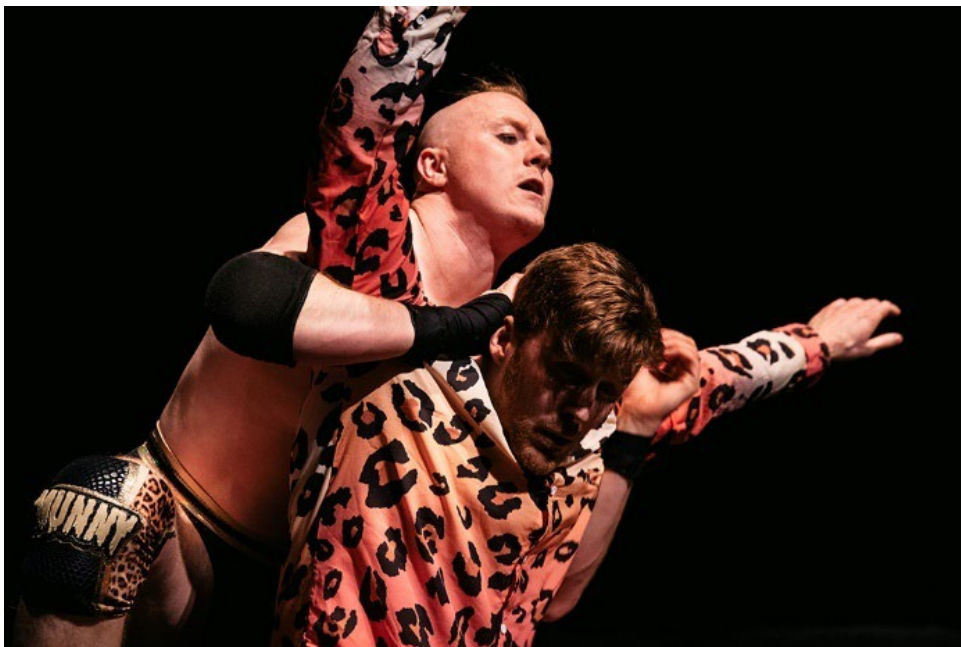


Figure 22.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, as each subsequent wrestler takes up the open challenge, we enter a new period of wrestling history. The first challenger, who evokes the wrestling of the 'All-In' era (circa 1930), is followed by an approximation of 1970s 'World of Sport', and in turn this gives over to the 'Attitude Era' (circa 1998). As the story leaps through time, the work style and character aesthetics shift. The first bout attempts a more catch-as-catch-can style of sporting contest, which

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<sup>39</sup> Inspired by historic figures such as Charles B. Cochran in the UK and P.T Burnum in the US.

sees The Bruiser challenged by 'Skip Skillamongee' (a name improvised on the spot). Indicated by his crude impression of a 1920s New York accent, the performers appear to be in the US, or perhaps Martinez is touring the UK. This opening display adopts the characteristics of exhibition wrestling common to the period. For example, Munny audibly calls each hold, in one moment telling the helpless Skip, 'have a glorious half nelson!' before throwing him to the stage floor with the cry of 'into a snap mare with a chin lock!' This narration is directed at both the (absent) audience and Skillamongee. Martinez quickly dispatches his victim with his 'patented full nelson', ending the first challenge. Skillamongee defeated, Crowley returns to his promoter persona, an effect achieved by the mere donning of a top hat. We are next introduced to Townley/Munny's next iteration of Munny Martinez.



Figure 23.

The second challenge of the performance is clearly situated in the UK, adopting the 'World of Sport' style of the 1960s–80s. Aesthetically this temporal shift is communicated through pronounced changes in the performance. For example, the Americana accent of the first Martino has given way to a thick British Yorkshire accent; and references are made to Martino being Queen Elizabeth II's

favourite wrestler. His opponent this time is again played by the hatless, and now trouser and shirtless, Crowley. This new challenger is dubbed 'Arthur Cumberland'. This part of the performance is particularly rich in its use of both intertextuality and embodied cultural practices. In the opening exchange, Cumberland grabs Martinez in a snug waist lock, which, in looking for an escape, causes the two to squat up and down in unison. As the two bodies of the wrestlers rise and fall together, Martinez treats us to a comedic uttering of 'aye up, aye up', the common colloquial saying of the North Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire regions of the UK.



Figure 24.

The final challenge takes place in the mid-to-late 1990s, and we are back in the USA, a move that is again indicated by Martinez's accent, this time an approximation of the distinct voice of famous wrestler Macho Man Randy Savage.<sup>40</sup> The change of setting is also supported by another hasty costume change by Crowley, who has now rediscovered his trousers and acquired neon green arm sleeves that are also era appropriate. His new name is simply 'The Bazooka'. This final open challenge features a far more pronounced shift in terms of the wrestling style. The catch-as-catch-

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<sup>40</sup> The Randy Savage voice is one of the most distinctive and frequently referenced in popular culture, so much so, I would suggest that this is the default voice most people go to when thinking of wrestling.

can sporting style of wrestling prominent in the first two challenges is now replaced by simple forearm blows and exaggerated open hand punches characteristic of mainstream wrestling during the 1990s. As the action gathers pace and intensity, Bazooka and Munny no longer employ generic wrestling holds, instead utilising recognisable moves of era appropriate stars. The Bazooka attempts Steve Austin's patented 'Stone Cold Stunner' and Martinez counters by attempting Dwayne The Rock Johnson's 'Rock Bottom' attack. After the two near misses, the sequence, and challenge, finishes with Martinez applying The Undertakers 'Tombstone Piledriver'. By incorporating these iconic wrestling moves, the performers are tapping into the history of wrestling, accessing it via each attack and briefly embodying the era.

The open challenge match explores ideas key to this chapter: it retells a condensed story of the history of wrestling; exemplified the forms spontaneity, play and improvisation; and it blended stylistic conventions and sensibilities. This required both performers to think beyond the traditional modes of presenting and performing wrestling. The story was sporting, but not sport, and the performance was theatrical, though not entirely theatre. It was an attempt to embody how wrestling storytelling progressed from single acts on music hall bills, to a fully-fledged genre with events comprised entirely of worked wrestling matches and the televised sports arena spectacle the genre eventually grew into. The bodies of the wrestlers engaged in combat tell that story, taking the audience on a wrestling journey from the past to the present.

## Physical culture

What is clear from this exploration of wrestling's past, is that even during its early moments, it was part of a wider network of entertainment that could not neatly be understood as either theatre or sport. It also points to how these tensions (such as between sport and theatre), lost in many practices, somehow endured in professional wrestling. Central to this then, are the bodies that performed and competed, as well as the spaces in which their work took place.

Litherland notes that In the United States, ‘a plethora of wrestlers doubled as circus and vaudeville strongmen’ (2018, p.56). In this way, wrestlers can be read as a part of a broader genre of physical performance. Further, he adds that ‘on the music hall stage, variations of physical culture display were borrowed’ (2018, p.99). These trained bodies sought fame and fortune through a diverse array of enterprises, including competitive prize fighting, lecturing on body building and exercise, working as strongmen and posing as human statues (2018, p.100). This kind of economic and artistic eclecticism would not seem out of place to wrestlers today, who often supplement their wrestling earnings. Wrestlers today may work as stunt men, sell images of their bodies on digital platforms like OnlyFans, enter bodybuilding competitions, and work as fitness coaches and personal trainers. Litherland notes how often embodied entertainment traditions like wrestling typically fall into two broad categories: those that contain an element of sporting competition based on aesthetics – ‘skating, high diving, and ballroom dancing’ (2018, p.4); and those that are not competitive but require similar embodied skills, such as ‘trapeze artistry, tightrope walking, sword throwing’ (2018, p.4). All these traditions exhibit a shared history and, during this period, I believe a process of cross-pollination occurred, one that continues to shape wrestling.

The success that early ‘worked’ and ‘shoot’ wrestling enjoyed in the music hall was not exclusively related to sport or theatre, it was part of the growing popularity of a new entertainment called ‘physical culture’. The term physical culture first appeared in the late nineteenth century and is used to describe the practice of training the body for muscularity rather than for a specific function or sport. It was made famous by figures like Eugen Sandow and George Hackenschmidt, who enjoyed fame as wrestlers, but also for their muscular bodies. Today the term is less prevalent, overtaken instead by broader labels, like the ‘fitness industry’, which encompasses weightlifting, functional fitness (CrossFit etc.), bodybuilding, calisthenics, strongman and strongwoman, and a host of related

sporting or physical activities<sup>41</sup>. Despite a decline in everyday use, physical culture is an important part of professional wrestling's theatrical ancestry. As a lens, physical culture remains useful for studying the demands placed on the body of the wrestler, the appeal of the action central to wrestling match-stories, and the aesthetics of those performances. The wrestler's body, like that of related athletes, is built to perform the physically demanding lifts, jumps, holds and sprints inherent to the performance. Wrestling requires the acquisition and maintenance of strength and conditioning, and commonly uses physical culture training modalities, such as anaerobic resistance work, explosive plyometric exercises, steady-state cardio and various systems of increasing aerobic capacity. Further, wrestling training itself is often highly intensive, contributing to the development of athleticism and aerobic fitness, as well as conditioning the body for the extreme, repetitive, impact of being slammed on the canvas. Physical culture is intrinsically linked to how wrestling works on a kinetic level, training the body to perform safely. Not only is the wrestler's body subjected to the transformative effects of strength training such as increased muscularity, but their bodies must also form hard calluses to protect against bruising and injury.<sup>42</sup>

The effect of wrestling's use of physical culture is functional, helping the wrestler's body to carry out the 'work', but it also serves theatrical and aesthetic purposes. For example, audiences do not expect or desire to see badly bruised wrestlers walking around the ring. Therefore, the wrestler's body, like that of bodybuilders, is also built to theatricalise. This use of physical culture is often carried out to the extreme, so much so that the bodies created gain a muscularity that exceeds the fundamental requirements of wrestling itself. This is most obvious in the stereotypical hyper-muscularity of wrestlers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Broderick Chow explores this in his chapter 'Muscle Memory: Re-enacting the fin-de-siecle strongman in pro-wrestling' (2017), where he traces the modern wrestling body back to early physical culture pioneers. In the wrestling

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<sup>41</sup> We could also here perhaps add recent cultural phenomena like assault course competitions (Tough Mudder for example), and things like Axe Throwing, and Medieval MMA, which is the practice of engaging in medieval combat with full suits of armour and blunted weapons.

<sup>42</sup> For example, neck strength is something critical to the safe execution and receipt of common moves like the suplex, as such you will often see wrestlers performing neck exercises not seen in any other sports.

industry, performers who build exceedingly muscular physiques are often labelled ‘body guys’,<sup>43</sup> which is a label attached to the marketability of this body type. However, Chow notes that ‘wrestling itself does not produce the sculpted body’ (Chow, Laine and Warden, 2016, p.151). Consequently, the pursuit of extreme muscle mass is more an aesthetic concern, related to cultural pressures and a desire to look like the stereotypical wrestler as perpetuated by popular culture. Therefore, Chow argues that the body-guy look is ‘that which exceeds its economic or social positioning’ and as such, musicality becomes a ‘purely theatrical’ element (Chow, Laine and Warden, 2016, p.149). The wrestler’s body, unlike that of a boxer or Olympic weightlifter who ‘make weight’ to fit the requirements of sporting competition, shapes their body for purposes of entertainment, and often within that storytelling. This development of muscle excessive to that required to simply wrestle, the ‘gimmicked body’ (to coin a phrase), becomes a kind of tipping point around which the wrestling body becomes theatricalised (Chow, Laine, Warden, 2016, p.149). Unlike athletes like strongmen or weightlifters, most wrestlers only require strength sufficient to perform wrestling moves, muscularity beyond this serves only a visual function.<sup>44</sup>

Chow notes that in many instances, ‘the wrestler’s body is a theatrical body’ (Chow, Laine, Warden, 2016, p.149). Much of wrestling storytelling in-the-ring is related to the use of the body. For example, the wrestler must learn to sell the pain of an opponent’s attacks, not merely through facial expressions, but through the expert manipulation of their body<sup>45</sup> in relation to that of their opponents. It is not sufficient to just fall and land safely, it matters how spectacularly one falls and how impactfully one appears to land. It is this building of reactions that takes the built body of the wrestler beyond sport and into storytelling. The health and performance of the body is economically

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<sup>43</sup> I would add that though this term is obviously gendered in a way that underscores wrestling’s long-history and persistent sexist practices, the excessively built body isn’t exclusive to the male wrestler, notable examples of ‘body women’ (to coin a phrase) include the 7<sup>th</sup> Wonder of the World Chyna who was a prolific bodybuilder.

<sup>44</sup> It is worth stating here that this is applicable not just to the excessively muscular, wrestling has a rich history of excessively large (in terms of body weight) and excessively small bodies.

<sup>45</sup> The art of selling is explored further in Chapter Five, however by way of underscoring the value attributed to a great sell and its full body manifestation... There are even dedicated fan blogs listing the greatest sellers of all time, see for example (Haverford, 2021, n.p.)

critical to wrestlers, their body is in effect their livelihood. It is a professional body that earns through its capacity to be athletic and theatrical. This idea of a professional body is another way that wrestling today continues to manifest its theatrical ancestry and its link to physical culture and popular entertainment. The professional bodies of the music hall era practiced an economic eclecticism. For example George Hackenschmidt (1878–1968), a figure Chow describes as a ‘physical culturalist, wrestler, actor, writer and entertainer’, is emblematic of the blurred lines existing during this period (Chow, 2015, p.30). Hackenschmidt was an innovator, popularising physical culture, as well as being one of the most famous wrestlers of the time. In his article on the ‘professional body’, Chow notes the example of a tour of the Commonwealth taken by Hackenschmidt in 1910, wherein he performed a ‘lengthy’ series of wrestling performances, alongside displays of his muscular body, and lectures to the audience on the practice of physical culture. Interspersed throughout this, were ‘light-hearted vaudeville acts’ which are cited as including magic, comedy routines and song (Chow, 2015, p.30). This account of Hackenschmidt’s show demonstrates how, as well as being ‘a precursor of contemporary bodybuilding and fitness programmes’, physical culture can also be understood as a ‘form of theatre’ (Chow, 2015, p.31). It shows that in this historic moment the built body of Hackenschmidt was part of a shared lineage of related embodied practices.

Present day professional wrestling continues to use physical culture to celebrate its athletic demands and as inspiration for storytelling. Perhaps no other recent example embodies the historical relation wrestling has to the stage and physical culture than former WWE tag team The Vaudevillians. During their brief run with the promotion, WWE’s presentation of The Vaudevillians lent heavily on the music hall aesthetic. The duo’s entrances were shown in black and white on television and they would appear onstage with a theatre curtain projected behind them, over this an era appropriate compare announced them to the audience. The teams costume, music, accents and the films visual effects reinforce the connection between wrestling and music hall. The Vaudevillians may be the most literal manifestation of this history, but they are far from the only one. For example, Broderick Chow notes the 1988 iteration of WWE’s annual Royal Rumble, during which

wrestler Dino Bravo performed a bench press weightlifting challenge in which he supposedly lifted a world record 715lbs (Chow, 2017, p.151). Another WWE example is from a storyline feud for the World Heavyweight Championship, in which prolific steroid user 'The Genetic Freak' Scott Steiner squared off with top villain Triple H in a bodybuilding 'pose down'.<sup>46</sup> Steiner would then<sup>47</sup> try to initiate his own bench press challenge, though no lifting would take place, instead settling for verbal sparring. What we see here, is how physical culture has frequently served a narrative function in wrestling storytelling. Often in these stories, physical culture is an antagonistic motif, a kind of masculine bravado, asking 'who can bench the most?' or who is more 'manly'? However, displays of physical prowess can also serve to help raise a wrestler's legitimacy.<sup>48</sup>

As well as occurring onscreen and as part of in-ring storytelling, the actual athletic credentials and capacities of wrestlers have become another area in which physical culture serves wrestling storytellers. With emphasis shifting in recent times toward the 'reality' of wrestling, WWE's YouTube channel has become a platform for celebrating wrestling's connection to the fitness industry. For example, WWE's channel features a video interview with the company's head strength and conditioning coach. The short film shows wrestlers engaging in a variety of training, including plyometrics, weightlifting and team training such as a tug-of-war (WWE, 2017, n.p.). This varied and functional training stands in contrast to the traditional bodybuilding style synonymous with wrestling in the 80s and 90s. Alongside short films like this, there are also examples of wrestlers branching out into the wider physical culture/fitness industry. In another video for YouTube, wrestler Seth Rollins describes how during rehab for a back injury, he dropped traditional bodybuilding in favour of the functional fitness sport CrossFit (WWE, 2016, n.p.). In the film he explains how CrossFit, which combines elements of gymnastics, Olympic weightlifting and endurance

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<sup>46</sup> The two wrestlers took turns to strike bodybuilding poses for the audience... And yes, this was indeed as ridiculous as it sounds.

<sup>47</sup> Indicative of its popularity, WWE's YouTube Channel has a whole playlist dedicated to this historic intersection between wrestling and physical culture. This playlist includes footage of wrestlers working out in grimy basement gyms, and wrestlers lifting in slick television studios (WWE, 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Though in reality audiences tend to be more impressed with wrestling acumen than they are hyperdeveloped abdominal muscles.

sports, allowed him to develop greater mobility, flexibility, and agility, as well as aiding with injury prevention. While the film is mostly factual, there is also storytelling occurring.<sup>49</sup> The title for example contains the words 'superhuman'. This has crossover with the kind of hyperbolic language used by both CrossFit itself in reference to its own athletes, as well as the kind of storytelling language associated with sport discussed in the previous chapter. The implication when read in both contexts being that 'superhuman' equals 'superhero'. This example shows how even the supposed reality of a non-diegetic text still serves to support the in-diegesis storytelling world of wrestling, i.e., WWE wrestler Seth Rollins is a superhuman athlete.<sup>50</sup> Here in these examples, physical culture not only helps us understand how storytelling functions, but also how the bodies that tell the stories are built to meet the demands of the storytelling process.

#### The World's Strongest Man Fights a Ferocious Lion



Figure 25: 'Theatre of Wrestling' film artwork.

<sup>49</sup> Clearly WWE could not pass up an opportunity to get one of its star attractions over.

<sup>50</sup> It is also worth noting here that WWE *always* refer to their talent as *superstars* and never wrestlers.

The final 'Theatre of Wrestling' performance is based on an account of physical culturist Eugen Sandow (1867–1925) wrestling a lion. Connor Heffernan notes how for many, Sandow was 'the undisputed face of the physical culture movement' (2021, p.150). This makes him an influential early figure during the music hall era. Sandow was the first, and certainly the most well-known, to profit (both in terms of fame and wealth) from the public's interest in these new acts. Litherland describes how Sandow thought of himself as a 'theatrical athlete', a term that no doubt resonates with how professional wrestlers view themselves today (Litherland, 2018, p.58). Sandow's success on the stage was a result of his ability to combine great physical strength, and impressive muscularity, with showmanship. David L. Chapman notes in his biography of Sandow how his 'ability to make himself the centre of attention no matter where he went or how crowded the room' made him a popular music hall act (1994, p.68). Plying his craft in bars, taverns and music halls, Sandow embraced the unruliness of those spaces with the anarchic energy that continues to define independent wrestling's appeal. For example, Chapman describes how Sandow would 'often delight in squeezing the backs of chairs until they broke into splinters, or if he was feeling particularly rumbunctious, he would punch his fist through the bottom of a cane chair' (1994, p.68). Working closely with his manager, Florenz Ziegfeld Jr, these escapades would fuel Sandow's notoriety, 'pulling in magnificent box office receipts on a nightly basis' (1994, p.68).



Figure 26 The 'World's Strongest Man' played by contemporary wrestler Charles Crowley emulates early physical culturists like Eugen Sandow.

Chapman provides a detailed account of the tale that inspired the 'Theatre of Wrestling' performance. It is rich in storytelling and captures key details that were woven into our retelling. In the year 1894, in one of his most infamous feats, Sandow would square off with Commodore the Wrestling Lion, a beast that was reported to weigh over 500-pounds (Heffernan, 2021, n.p.). The event took place over a single evening in San Francisco, CA, with a reported three thousand fans in attendance. The fight itself came about due to a cancelled bout which pitted a different Lion, the 650-pound Parnell, against a bear called Siskiyou. When that match was called off, Sandow's publicist Ziegfeld proposed Sandow replace the bear and fight the lion instead. However, fighting the 'truly ferocious' Parnell, who had recently mauled his trainer to death, was deemed too dangerous (1994, p.85). Therefore a replacement was found, Commodore, who in contrast to Parnell is described as a 'mangy, bedraggled, superannuated beast', as well as both 'hapless and toothless' (1994, p.85).

The fight, with the hyperbole that became synonymous with the promotional storytelling of wrestling, was dubbed 'The Event of the Century' (1994, p.85). Taking place in a purpose-built tent, trickery and shenanigans were in play from the outset. For example, due to some ingenious stagecraft, to get to their seats, audience members had to make their way past a large cage containing not Commodore, but the fearsome Parnell. This created great anticipation for what might unfold in the fight. When that came however, Commodore failed to live up to the promotional hype. Chained, gloved and muzzled, reporters noted how, rather than fear the beast, the reaction quickly turned to sympathy. Further adding to the debacle, Commodore proved a most unwilling opponent, disinterested in engaging Sandow in any form of combat. The result, in short, was a match in which essentially Sandow tried his best to both turn the heat of the audience, and to animate the deadweight of the lion as best he could.<sup>51</sup> This apparent apathy on the part of the lion led to accusations that the wild beast had been chemically subdued. Sandow, the papers claimed, had fixed the bout: it was a fake. The claims that the contest was a fix, accusations refuted by Sandow and Ziegfeld, offers intriguing parallels to the kind of discourse commonly attached to professional wrestling.

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<sup>51</sup> For an amusing 'blow by blow' account of Sandow's struggles with Commodore, see David L. Chapman (Chapman, 1994, p.85)



Figure 27.

For the Theatre of Wrestling's retelling of this story, elected parts of the historic account were given to the wrestlers. The new performance revolves around the drugged (or lazy) and uncooperative lion (depending on whose story is to be believed) and the Strongman's desperation to engage it in combat. The unwillingness of the lion character to participate in the Strongman's public display of strength and daring becomes a source of conflict and frustration. The more the lion resists, the more frustrated the strongman becomes, and the more the audience<sup>52</sup> turn in favour of the lion. What happens is the emergence of the classic professional wrestling character roles of heel and face, so when the frustration becomes simply too much for the strongman to take, he sadistically stamps on the lion's paw, and in the process turns the lion into the babyface and himself into the heel.

The strength of this final performance is in how it demonstrates unusual ways that professional wrestling can be used as a storytelling medium. Here, the wrestlers are challenged to reimagine a moment from history that is no longer accessible to us in an embodied way, only in written records. It is notable how, when read alongside the original text, particular details were recreated in the

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<sup>52</sup> The audience was of course absent; therefore, audio was used to create the effect of an audience in post-production.

retelling, such as how the lion draws sympathy from the audience and the strongman heat. It also goes to show how, regardless of what promotional trickery is at play, the success of the performance hinges on the participation of the audience. Where the power of the retelling comes however, are in the possibilities also for reimagining it, and extending. The actual wrestling in the retelling is of course far more complex than that of the labouring efforts of Commodore and Sandow, in the new version, The Lion is able eventually, once they have shaken off their fatigue, to battle back and ultimately overcome its tormentor, adding a different moral layer to the story.

### Anarchic energy

Where independent professional wrestling most forcefully manifests its theatrical ancestry is in the 'anarchic energy' it creates in the moment of performance. This concluding section comes back to the wrestling Barthes watched, and the wrestling I make. Barthes finds his wrestling, which he knows as the 'all-in' variety, 'hidden in the most squalid Parisian halls' (2005, p.23). My wrestling is also 'hidden', not in halls, but in small-theatres, local art centres, nightclubs and pubs, only some of which are squalid. 'All-In' as Barthes calls it, is the first recognisable version of what would become modern professional wrestling. 'All-In' established many of the formal conventions seen in wrestling today. It moved wrestling away from the music hall, into newly built sports arenas and halls, creating events entirely dedicated to wrestling. However, despite shifting the form forward, Warden notes how All-In would 'never quite shed the fetters of the music hall or variety performance' (2020, p.153). In bringing this chapter to its conclusion, All-in provides a bridge between the deeper pasts explored so far, and the recent practice that the remainder of this thesis focuses on.

All-in, meaning all moves were legal, emerged in the USA in the 1920s, and despite being 'deemed too wild, uncouth, theatrical and, in short, unacceptable' (Griffiths, 2015, p.39), by the 1930s it became the dominant form of wrestling across the globe, quickly becoming 'immensely popular' (Litherland, 2018, p.67). Litherland, attributes much of All-in's success to the way it 'continued pleasures and forms of presentation that wrestling and sparring performances had developed in

circuses, fairgrounds and music halls of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (2014, p.130). According to Warden, as Barthes's analysis attests, All-in was tricky to define, with commentators pondering for the first time, but certainly not the last, questions such as 'is it sport or performance? Fake or real? Something to be dismissed as overblown spectacle or taken seriously as a threat to society?' (2020, p.152). Developing this further, Warden goes on to describe how this unashamedly theatrical form became embroiled in antitheatrical sentiment; too unruly, too stagey, too melodramatic it was labelled a 'perverse parody' and accused either of 'actual brutish violence or of fakery' (2020, p.155).

Pivotal here is that Warden moves analysis beyond questions of fakery and or violence, and instead reads in it a radical potential, suggesting that 'the close proximity of wrestling bodies enables a complex reading of all-in wrestling's gender politics' (2020, p.155). Further, All-In, she argues, could be reimagined as a potentially 'queer space', whereby it is able to 'negotiate being both queer and stereotypically masculine at the same time' (2020, p.155). This is a suggestion that resonates with the sentiments of Chow, by which the wrestlers themselves, not only inhabit but shape this queer space, as well as embodying it. Chow concludes his analysis by proposing the 'gimmicked' body of the wrestler as the site of potential radical possibilities, a body that 'repeats and remembers a queer potential'<sup>53</sup> that was first articulated in the physical culture movement' (Chow , Laine, Warden, 2016, p.149). Using this productive queerness as a site of potential resistance to normative constructs of the body suggests the body of the wrestler may come to represent more radical practices.

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<sup>53</sup> Chow notes in his use of the term queer that is designed to evoke 'queer as a critical position against the normative' (Chow, 2016, p.149).



Figure 28: non-binary wrestler Visage performing a 'drag' version of fellow wrestler Gene Munny.

I claim that a key driving force in All-in is the persistent influence of comedy and a kind of anarchic creative energy which resists the orthodox and conventional. Through art and comedy, wrestling comes to demonstrate a transgressive potential associated with artistic endeavour. Ian Wilkie, exploring the relationship between these, also takes his analysis back to vaudeville, music hall and variety theatre. He offers groundwork for considering how we might think about the crossovers between ideas of the comedian and the artist, and in this case the wrestler. In other words, under what terms we might start to consider wrestling as art, and wrestlers as artists? Comedic elements in art aspire to freedom and 'transgressive possibilities', and to use comedy for art is 'to borrow from the stylings of a much admired, if slightly wayward, dangerous, older cousin' (Wilkie, 2014,

p.226). Willkie traces comedic art from Picasso, through Surrealism and to Dada, noting how 'a strain of Vaudevillian comedy became apparent in early twentieth century art movements' due to its 'anarchic appeal' (2014, p.220). The key here is how physical culture and popular entertainment conspire together through comedy and art. This suggests wrestling is a practice embodying all four interests, but also excessive to them, hinting at possessing qualities that are potentially unique. This I argue has only come to be realised in the recent experimental, and anarchic, practices of recent independent wrestling.

## Conclusion

To find value in looking back into wrestling history was genuinely unexpected. I did not predict writing about the form's past in such detail. All wrestling continues to express the histories highlighted in this chapter to some degree, however it is the experimental enclaves of the independent sub-genre where it is most visible. In a chapter exploring the 'intertwined performance historiography of circus, the avant-garde and professional wrestling', Claire Warden proposes the idea that the bodies of all three disciplines are 'radically participatory' (2022, p.158). Taking the dual associations of the wrestling ring 'canvas' to mean both the thing upon which wrestling happens, and a surface for supporting art, she finds new 'inter-artistic allegiances' between seemingly disparate creative endeavours (2022, p.157). In doing so, Warden understands wrestling as part of the wider historiography I have outlined. Stemming from this, she concludes by proposing the term 'artist-athlete' to describe wrestlers working in this way, which could be read as a development of the earlier label 'theatrical athlete' attributed to Sandow (Litherland, 2018, p.99). Both terms also resonate with Chow, Laine, and Warden's categorisation of wrestling as a 'sport-art'. The strength of terms like artist-athlete, is how they capture the radical qualities of experimental wrestling, without detaching it from the sport that underpins all wrestling. Experimentation guides the work of promotions like Wrestling Resurgence, as well as several other like-minded promotions and wrestlers. Other examples include Schadenfreude and Friends, Lucha Britannia and the various projects of artist-athletes like Heather Bandenburg. For Warden, these new wrestling storytellers

create ‘genre-twisting intertextual relationships with live art, burlesque and surrealist comedy’ (Warden, 2022, p.165). Key to their work is how it is ‘firmly grounded in the bodies of the wrestlers as performance practitioners’ (Warden, 2022, p.165). In the next three chapters, the collective ideas of the previous two – that independent wrestling is a unique storytelling art, stemming from a diverse theatrical ancestry – are explored in granular detail. Before moving onto those chapters, a brief interval is afforded the reader. This done by way of further framing the work of the second half of the thesis.

## THE INTERVAL

*As the bell sounds to mark the end of the first half of every wrestling event, it is traditional to provide the audience with an interval. During the intervals of Wrestling Resurgence shows, I always experience a variety of emotions. Sometimes, in stressful situations, such as the show overrunning, I brace myself for a mad dash to get ready to go again. Especially demanding shows might also include frantic ‘firefighting’ and problem solving. If I am lucky, but also really stressed, I might take my headset off and sneak outside for a few minutes to compose myself. Alternatively, if the show is going well, I might take a stroll around the backstage to thank the first half wrestlers for their efforts or tour the bar area, seeking out regular fans for a chat, or encourage them to buy a raffle ticket. If I’m really lucky, someone might buy me a pint. In-keeping with the spirit of the wrestling event, I have decided to offer you, the reader, an interval to this thesis that I hope falls firmly into the latter category. This is a moment to take stock, but also set up the work to come. Kindly, please buy a raffle ticket.<sup>54</sup>*

The next three chapters are dedicated to a granular examination of wrestling’s artistic construction as a storytelling art. Building on the contextual groundwork of Chapters One and Two, which expanded the idea of wrestling ‘work’ and showed how this emerged from a far-reaching theatrical

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<sup>54</sup> But be warned, in British independent wrestling it is traditional to raucously boo all raffle winners.

ancestry, the remainder of the thesis is a journey through three centres of storytelling activity: wrestlers, booking and matches. Collectively this leads to my claim for an expanded view of wrestling as creative practice, which is connected to broader ideas typically associated with more established parts of the arts and culture sector.

In professional wrestling scholarship it is striking that positions of authorship are often treated as secondary or left absent from analysis. Seldom are wrestlers, promoters, or bookers considered as creative individuals, rather their work is left to fan discourse. It could be that the protectionist practices of kayfabe create barriers for scholarship. For example, Eero Laine notes how historically those working behind the scenes in wrestling 'vehemently disavowed' its theatricality and treated with hostility anyone who tried to discuss it as anything other than 'legitimate' sport (2014, p.92). It could also be that academics' interests are too attached to specific disciplinary frameworks.

Consequently, the individual authors fall outside the scope of those inquiries. Alternatively, it could be that WWE draws scholarly attention to its version of wrestling, where wrestlers are presented as either authorless or lack agency to discuss the innerworkings of their craft. Despite this hegemony, some scholars have trodden different paths and called for different approaches. Kit MacFarlane's enticingly, though not succinctly, titled article: 'A Sport, A Tradition, A Religion, A Joke: The Need for a Poetics of In-ring Storytelling and a Reclamation of Professional Wrestling as a Global Art' (2012) offers a call to action. MacFarlane argues for engagement with professional wrestling as a 'dramatic art-form' that engages with 'individual ideological reaffirmations, tensions and conflicts' (2012, p.138). This call has largely gone unanswered. It is still the case that scholarship is weighted toward specific disciplinary fields, such as performance studies, culture and media studies, and that this presents a wrestling that is a 'monolithic and substantially authorless cultural entity' (2012, p.138). As a result, the creative work, of promoters, bookers and wrestlers is dealt with systematically through 'cultural, social and developmental interpretations', leaving 'the artistic construction... as a means of presenting a number of specific dramas and performances un- or under-explored' (MacFarlane, 2012, p.137). Without engagement like this, MacFarlane warns, the art of wrestling

storytelling risks being dismissed, derided as only ‘working class entertainment’ (MacFarlane, 2012, p.137).

The remainder of the thesis is dedicated to establishing my concept of wrestling-practice. The following three chapters explore the work of professional wrestling’s key creative producers. These are the people that have the most agency within wrestling storytelling. They are ‘workers’ in both the wrestling and artistic sense of the term. Pushing independent professional wrestling in new directions, challenging previous ways of telling stories, and resisting the various ethical concerns that have plagued its past. These chapters therefore deepen the meaning of ‘work’ developed so far by exploring the implicit connection between the artistic meanings of the term and its use in wrestling.

In the space afforded by this interval, the only thing left to do now, is introduce the wrestlers booked to appear in the remainder of the thesis.

## The Wrestlers



Figure 29: Evie Carney who wrestles as Charli Evans.

Evie Carny is a twenty-six-year-old professional wrestler originally from Australia, she performs under the name Charli Evans. She made her in-ring debut in December 2014. Despite being young in years, Carney is an experienced and accomplished wrestler who has spent time working and training

in Japan for the renowned Sendai Girls promotion and in the US for major independent promotions like Game Changer Wrestling (GCW). Carney made her Wrestling Resurgence debut in 2018. In March 2020 she became the first woman to win the Wrestling Resurgence Championship,<sup>55</sup> which is the promotion's biggest storyline prize. Carney is also a model, utilising sites such as the content sharing platform OnlyFans to publish adult themed portraits of herself and generate income. Inspired by legendary Japanese wrestler Manami Toyota's book *B. Bomb* (1996), she has recently self-published her own fine art book in collaboration with award winning photographer James Musselwhite.



Figure 30: Tom Dawkins who wrestles as Cara Noir.

Thirty-six-year-old Tom Dawkins is a professional wrestler based in London. He has been a feature of the UK independent scene for the last seven years performing as the 'Black Swan' Cara Noir and debuted in 2010. Dawkins has wrestled in the UK for Progress Wrestling, Wrestling Resurgence, Attack: pro wrestling, Riptide Wrestling and Pro Wrestling Chaos. He also regularly appears on the

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<sup>55</sup> Championship belts are one of countless fascinating objects in wrestling that exist in two places at once. In storytelling terms, the Championship is the ultimate prize. In 'reality', it could be argued that wrestling belts are mere props, but I think that argument ignores the symbolic aspect of being awarded a championship. The best champions are the performers most valued by a company. When Charli Evans became Wrestling Resurgence champion, in that moment she embodied, more than any of her peers, what the company stood for.

global scene, for promotions including, Smash Wrestling in Canada, WXW in Germany and DDT in Japan. Alongside performing in the ring, Dawkins is a highly respected trainer, and the founder and co-owner of innovative wrestling school Playfight.



Figure 31: Rachel Seagroatt who wrestled as Clementine.

Rachel Seagroatt is thirty-three years old and has wrestled for six years. Seagroatt studied wrestling at the highly influential London School of Lucha Libre, which was known for its innovative pedagogical blend of performance art and Mexican Lucha. The school was also regarded for its focus on character development and experimental storytelling. While admitting to having a complicated relationship to much mainstream and orthodox independent wrestling, Seagroatt has developed an eclectic CV that includes appearances in film and on the stage. Since our initial interview she has taken the decision to step away from full-time wrestling and instead focus on a broader practice of combat performance and martial arts. Seagroatt is best known for wrestling under the name Clementine and has appeared for companies such as Pro-Wrestling EVE, Revolution Pro Wrestling and Wrestling Resurgence.



Figure 32: Ross Jones who wrestles as RJ Singh.

Ross Jones (forty-two-years-old), whose data is exclusively used in Chapter Five, is the most experienced wrestler I interviewed. Wrestling under the name RJ Singh, he has been performing for over twenty-one years. Jones was a staple of the early boom-period of British wrestling, during which time he frequently appeared for Progress Wrestling, Southside Wrestling, IPW:UK, Lucha Britannia and Rev Pro. As well as continuing to wrestle, he is a respected trainer recognised for his specialist knowledge relating specifically to storytelling. He is currently the booker of independent wrestling company 4PW.

## Collaboration

Collaborative work, and the related idea 'co-creation', are among wrestling's most useful concepts. As such, these concepts feature prominently in the next three chapters, which have in a sense been co-created with a roster<sup>56</sup> of collaborators. For the purposes of this research the roster I have assembled includes both independent wrestlers and representatives from independent wrestling,

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<sup>56</sup> Use of the word 'roster' in wrestling typically relates to mainstream wrestling products where they employ a roster of full-time talent that are contacted exclusively. However, despite this very seldom being the case for independent companies, the term is often used fictionally as part of a company's storytelling. For example, an embittered wrestler might in a worked promo claim they are the most underrated wrestler on the Wrestling Resurgence roster and deserving of greater opportunities.

each of whom contributed testimony on a range of topics. In the case of the wrestlers, I have sought to capture in writing the same collaborative and co-creative energy that I experience working with wrestlers in Wrestling Resurgence. In this sense, I engaged each subject in what Guy Cools terms 'dialogical practice'. Cools suggests in his own interview-based research on imaginative bodies, such as dancers, performance artists and dramaturges, that it is 'in the shifts of the conversation and in the spaces in between utterances that hopefully new insights arise' (2017, p.12). In doing so, this forms a kind of 'shared collective consciousness' between interviewer and subject (2017, p.12).

## CHAPTER THREE: BOOKING



Figure 33: Myself in my capacity as Booker, backstage at the Y Theatre with a professional wrestler working on a Wrestling Resurgence project.

*In a way, I have been preparing to be a wrestling booker my whole life. This is a story about my first experiences of booking. My first roster of professional wrestlers are four inches tall and made of plastic. However, in booking them many of the same principles that applied then, remain relevant. The wrestling events of my childhood take place in a toy ring, surrounded by cardboard stands, accessed by a homemade entrance ramp. The figures are replicas of the sport's great superstars: The*

*Undertaker, Hulk Hogan, Yokozuna, Sting and Bret Hart, to name a few. The stories told in my imaginary arena mirror the 'real' world of wrestling as seen on VHS and TV. After school and on the weekends, I would stage weekly episodes of my own wrestling TV show. Each show would build toward spectacular PPV extravaganzas, where wrestling heroes and villains would wage epic battles in the ring, on the microphone and backstage. It was a soap-opera world of wrestling complete with elaborate match stipulations, compelling characters and breath-taking action. Twenty years later, I find myself doing many of the same things, only with actual wrestlers in a real ring in front of a live audience. I suspect my ten-year-old self is immensely proud.*

How I booked my imaginary shows is not dramatically different to booking in the actual professional wrestling industry. In my bedroom, I would select the wrestling figures and arrange them vertically in pairs on the floor, forming matches. These would be ordered hierarchically: main event at the top; opening match at the bottom. This is booking: the act of creating and ordering contests into a 'card' of matches. The act of booking is fundamental to all wrestling storytelling. To attempt to read wrestling without it would be like studying a film without paying attention to casting, directing or writing. That is how central it is. This chapter defines booking as a complex process and locates the role of booker at the apex of wrestling's storytelling architecture. Booking sets the parameters for storytelling and locates matches within wider processes of storytelling. As such, the booker is a key decision maker, guiding the micro-story of the match told by the wrestlers, while also always keeping the bigger narrative of that show, and forthcoming shows, in perspective. In balancing the demands of the next show, each wrestler, and the shows after, the booker's job is to hold everything together in a way that engages the audience and profits the promotion. In playing such a vital role, this process affords bookers significant power within the industry.

This chapter is constructed around key facets of booking as a process and booking as a role. It Defines booking within professional wrestling, supported by literature on wrestling's history, wrestling scholarship, data gathered from across the UK independent scene and autoethnography.

Then, using specific examples gathered during field work, it provides a first-of-its kind theorisation of booking as a storytelling process within independent wrestling. Building on this, it then considers the implications of power, and questions whether an expanded concept of booking could create a new future which extricates wrestling from the regressive aspects of its past. It is not the intention of this chapter to provide a broad analysis of booking in British independent wrestling. Instead, it argues for booking as an artistic practice vital to wrestling storytelling. And while data is used to support this claim, it is about uncovering the latent potential of booking to shift wrestling scholarship, rather than offer an exclusively data-driven analysis of the UK wrestling scene. The overarching claim is for booking as a powerful method for presenting wrestling in new ways and telling new types of stories.

What is booking?

Booking is absent from the public presentation of wrestling events. We do not see any booking notes and are not privy to what the booking is aiming to achieve in the performance. The booker is also absent, we do not see them in the ring unless they are a defined character in the story.<sup>57</sup> It is perhaps not surprising given this, that booking as a storytelling process is also largely absent from wrestling scholarship. The booker is a shadowy but powerful agent working behind the scenes, we see the outcomes of their work (who wins or loses) but are left to guess the logic behind those decisions. As for the more complex aspects of the booking process such as around tone, style, character, only traces of this work are visible in the ring. It is also rare that we hear the booker's motives. Bookers do not for example appear as film directors do when promoting an upcoming release, such as giving interviews explaining their intentions to the media.<sup>58</sup>

Booking is an ambiguous term, meaning different things depending on context and interpretation.

To complicate matters further, it is often used interchangeably with the term promoter. In my

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<sup>57</sup> This is common to mainstream companies like WWE and AEW. For example, throughout the late 90s and early 2000s WWE owner and booker Vince McMahon would play an exaggerated version of himself. While Vince would appear in the capacity as the person running the show, his specific role as Booker was generally masked in favour of a kind of fictionalised general manager/authority figure. More recently Tony Khan, owner, and booker of AEW, has appeared in his product in a role more clearly defined as booker, however there is still a clear layer of storytelling around this.

<sup>58</sup> Occasionally this happens, but rarely is it in a non-performative capacity.

analysis, I take promoter to imply ownership over a wrestling promotion/company, and booker to mean specifically the job of booking wrestlers and matches. Historically there was greater separation between the two roles, however, in independent professional wrestling they are blurred, with promoters typically in charge of booking. Given both processes are linked, promotion is also discussed throughout, but generally in specific relation to booking.

Indicative of its absence in wrestling scholarship, the precise etymology of the term has gone untraced. There are three common uses:

- ‘The book’<sup>59</sup>: used figurately (and literally) to refer to a diary within which shows are written in as dates and composed into cards of matches.
- ‘The booker’: person responsible for deciding the matches, the wrestlers and what the match outcomes are.
- ‘Booking’: the process by which the match is created, how the match-story plays out, what is demanded/required of the wrestlers and any wider storylines that the match might be contributing to.

For fans, the secrecy around booking makes it one of the form’s most enticing subjects. This makes those rare moments where the reality of booking filters into the ring particularly notable.

Mainstream wrestling in the late 1990s was an especially rich period for skirmishes around what fans knew about wrestling and what was concealed. For example, when wrestler Brian Pillman uttered the words ‘I respect you, booker man’ direct to camera, approximately ninety-six seconds into his ‘I respect you strap match’ with WCW Booker and wrestler Kevin Sullivan, the foundations of wrestling ‘kayfabe’ were shaken to their core. Pillman’s statement, which Wilson Koh views as a ‘Worked Shoot’ for the way it breaks the fourth wall, pointed directly to the hidden role of the booker (2017,

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<sup>59</sup> In his podcast, JJ Dillon, a wrestler, manager and booker active during the territory era of North American wrestling (circa 1960–1980), recalls how he would meet at the Amarillo home of professional wrestlers’ brothers and wrestling promoters Terry and Dory Funk and sit with a physical book in front of them. The group would discuss plans for TV tapings and then book the rest of their live dates accordingly (Keller, 2015, n.p.).

p.462). It is an interesting moment because Pillman uses the specific term, 'Booker'. Having said his piece on air during a major live event, he turned from the ring and simply left – an action that would see him fired from WCW. As with much wrestling storytelling, the authenticity of this anecdote is entangled in 'kayfabe', mythology and conspiracy. Some, like Koh, suggest that Pillman's outburst was all a 'work', albeit an especially innovative one. Regardless of its status as 'work' or 'shoot', the fact remains, Pillman did break 'kayfabe' by publicly identifying Sullivan as the booker. Further, Pillman's actions were reported to have 'deeply upset many veteran workers' during a period where wrestlers still saw 'kayfabe' as sacred (McCron, n.d.). Pillman highlighted not just the artifice, but the power behind it: Sullivan, the person responsible for determining the outcomes of the matches, the person who on this occasion had not only booked Pillman to lose, but himself to win. This moment highlights a key tension between what is presented to the audience in the ring and what is happening backstage. When Pillman uttered the word 'booker' mid-performance, he pulled back the curtain to reveal a hidden reality. Even in fandom, where booking is discussed in near forensic detail, it is still frequently misrepresented, and not adequately conceptualised.<sup>60</sup>

Historically, booking and promotion were kept separate, with the job of booker falling to an experienced or trusted wrestler. In the example of Brian Pillman, wrestler Kevin Sullivan was also WCW booker. There are several noteworthy bookers from the history of wrestling that helped develop booking as both a storytelling process and a performance practice. For example, former World Heavyweight Champion Dusty Rhodes created the prototype wrestling PPV event 'Starrcade' as well as matches like multiple-wrestler cage bout 'Wargames'. Perhaps more influential, and fundamental, however was his 'Dusty finish', which is a way of ending a match where a specific wrestler would win, typically the fan favourite, only for the decision to be reversed on a technicality. Though the finish itself is credited to booker Eddie Graham, the frequency with which Rhodes used it, and the high-profile nature of the matches he booked, led to the finish bearing his name. Another

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<sup>60</sup> The long-running professional wrestling insider journal 'Wrestling Insider Newsletter' have dedicated awards for both booker of the year and promoter of the year dating back to 1982.

booker of notable influence was Cowboy Bill Watts, who during the 1980s was booker of the widely influential Mid-South Wrestling Association. As well as developing several noteworthy wrestlers and wrestling teams, including The Midnight Express and The Junkyard Dog, Watts's booking of Mid-South was synonymous with upholding kayfabe, logical storytelling and a hard-hitting in-ring style (J. Phillips, 2023, n.p.). The work of current AEW booker and promoter Tony Kahn (not himself a wrestler) has invited recent comparisons to Watts, with legendary wrestling commentator Jim Ross, noting specifically how the two bookers utilise the involvement of wrestlers in the creative process (Dange, 2022, n.p.). While many bookers are former or active wrestlers, this is not always the case and there are many high-profile examples of non-wrestlers performing the role. Often, as in the case of Khan, and most famously Vince McMahon (WWE), bookers are also the promoters and owners of the company. One final example is Paul Heyman, who was the producer and booker of the notorious Philadelphia-based Extreme Championship Wrestling (1993–2001). Heyman's influence as booker included introducing Japanese-inspired hardcore wrestling to the US, this came at a time when wrestling's increasingly adult audience were seeking alternatives to the family friendly wrestling of WWE and WCW. Heyman was also regarded as a developer of talent, giving wrestlers such as Mick Foley, Brain Pillman (post-WCW firing) and Steve Austin, a platform to express themselves freely, leading to ground-breaking promos and storylines. He also popularised Japanese and Mexican Lucha Libre stars among US audiences, giving talents like Rey Mysterio Jr, Eddie Guerrero, Tajiri and Masato Tanaka their first bookings outside their native countries. Within these examples, key features emerge that start to demonstrate various functions of booking and bookers. Booking here is about setting style and tone, developing talent and determining match outcomes. This also highlights the role of the booker in the history of wrestling, playing a key role in developing the genres approach to storytelling.

As a creative process booking emerged around the same time as the related concepts 'work', 'shoot' and 'kayfabe'. For a match to be theatricalised, the outcome needed predetermining, and so it became someone's job to decide who won, and how and why they should win. Scott Beekman traces

the earliest instances of wrestling 'work' (and therefore booking) back as far as the 1890s where changing tastes in entertainment meant shifts in how 'shoot' wrestlers earned a living (2006, p.38–9). He notes that it became increasingly common for professional wrestlers to travel in troupes (like theatre companies), wrestling one another from town to town in worked bouts. For example, former 'shoot' wrestler William Muldoon, upon retirement, became an early precursor to modern bookers. Muldoon 'instituted time limits in his touring matches, a practice that became increasingly common, as a means of keeping his troupe on schedule and to limit the potential for defeat or injury' (Beekman 2006, p.39). While this change might first appear marginal, the imposition of time limits was an early attempt to control how wrestling was presented, part of a process by which wrestling 'slowly became an experience in pure entertainment' (Beekman, 2006, p.39). During this key period, 'shoot' and 'worked' contests co-existed, but the former led to long, dull and drawn-out matches. To combat this, Litherland notes that booking outcomes meant wrestlers could 'work' to create 'fluid exciting and engaging sporting spectacles, controlling wins and losses for maximum dramatic effect' (Litherland, 2018, p.68). Booking therefore became a way to make wrestling more palatable and profitable. Further, by using booking, promoters were able to 'push'<sup>61</sup> who they anticipated the audience wanted (or did not want) to win. This opened the door for more creative (and lucrative) storytelling opportunities. It also meant that unscrupulous (and paranoid) bookers and promoters could fix who they *wanted* to win, not who *would* or *could* win in a legitimate sporting sense. This meant giving victories and championships to wrestlers they trusted. Wrestlers who would not jump ship to a different promotion or go into business for themselves. Booking became not only an

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<sup>61</sup> 'Push' meaning to push a wrestler up the event card. In booking practice, to push a wrestler is to attempt to elevate a wrestler in the eyes of the audience. Knowing when to push a wrestler and when not to push a wrestler, and identifying a wrestler that deserves or is ready for a push is an important skill that bookers must attempt to master. There are many notable examples, particularly in WWE, of wrestlers being pushed when they are not ready (in terms of skill) or not desired (in terms of audience reaction). Examples include WWE's failed push of Lex Luger throughout 1993 and into 1994. There are also examples where companies seemingly refuse to push a wrestler that is over with the audience. A failed push can be damaging to both wrestler and promotion.

exercise in entertainment, but also a way to exert control over wrestling and wrestlers. Bookers could now consolidate power by fixing which wrestlers were recognised as champions.<sup>62</sup>

In this early history (circa 1920) a group of three promoters called the 'Gold Dust Trio' stand out as particularly innovative. The Trio was especially inventive in using booking as a storytelling tool to entertain and monetise audiences. In pursuit of this, they developed many of the booking techniques foundational to modern professional wrestling storytelling. Beekman attributes several innovations to them, including ending contests in unsatisfying ways to draw fans back in the hope of a more conclusive resolution at the next show. To achieve this, they used conventions still practiced today including 'out-of-ring count outs, double count-outs due to head bumps' as well as time limit draws known as 'broadways' (Beekman, 2006, p.657–8). Booking in this way gave promoters far more creative licence around how they presented and marketed matches. From the 1930s onwards, when 'All In' became the dominant form of professional wrestling, promoters and bookers explored new ways to enthrall, captivate and ultimately profit from their audiences. For example, Litherland notes how they 'added clear narratives grounded in moralistic and melodramatic characters, often featuring excessive violence, the use of weapons in matches, blood, violence toward referees, fighting in the audience and gimmick matches like mud wrestling' (Litherland, 2018, p.68). In this shifting space, individuals like the famous showman P. T. Barnum capitalised. Barnum, and others like C. B. Cochran in the UK, would push storytelling even further, exploiting questions about the authenticity of wrestling to their advantage. Not only did booking change what happened in the match, increasingly storytelling was used to generate a far grander artifice, whereby 'embellished narratives were offered, and sizes and weights were exaggerated' (Litherland, 2018, p.105). Consequently, 'kayfabe' grew in importance and wrestling's appeal came to be attached to questions around its legitimacy.

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<sup>62</sup> There is a complicated history of these early transitions from competitive sport to pre-determined theatre. In essence, this triggers both the arrival of booking as a creative process, but also an extremely complicated politics of booking. Beekman has chronicled much of this early history, including several examples of champions double crossing bookers and vice versa see (Scott M. Beekman, 2006, p.54-55.).

Another important consequence of booking concerned how wrestlers were presented in match-stories. With outcomes fixed, success was no longer exclusively attached to physical strength and fighting skill, who won was now a question of who the booker or the audience wanted or did not want to win. This led to two related developments for wrestling storytelling: the introduction of heroes and villains and the creation of characters and personas. Beekman traces this innovation back to the early successes of promoters in North America, who found success when positioning local former American Football players in prominent positions on their cards. Recognising the popularity of these local celebrities, promoters became focused on cultivating unique performance personas around their star attractions. They would then book antagonistic opponents for them to battle against. Soon this burgeoning dichotomy 'became codified into a Manichaeian system of rule-abiding good guys ("babyfaces" or "faces") and despicable villains... ("heels")' (Beekman, 2006, p.64). By the 1930s the system of faces and heels had become standard practice across professional wrestling and is noted for making wrestling both popular and profitable during the period (Beekman, 2006, p.65). Booking, which began as a protectionist practice, created the possibility for storytelling and in turn created an entirely new genre – professional wrestling.

### Booking in practice

*I no longer book wrestling lying on my bedroom floor. The wrestlers I book now are much taller than four inches tall and are certainly not made of plastic. Today, unlike the bookers of the past who wrote matches into a physical diary, I typically book Wrestling Resurgence shows using a combination of the note's application on my phone, a What's App group chat and Twitter's direct messaging function. Sometimes, if I feel like the phone is melting my brain, or if I want to escape its many distractions, I go back to the original meaning of the term, and turn to a pencil and paper. The process has not changed much, it is still one of arrangement, and of visualisation and imagination. Arrangement is often the most time consuming. Names are written out and placed into hypothetical match combinations, then ordered into the card. This is still always written out with the main event at the top and the opening match at the bottom. The interval is also typically included. My*

*preference is always for the symmetry of a six-match card, though often this becomes seven, with four in the first half. Regardless of how complex the goal of the event or individual matches might be, fundamentally in my view, booking is about the overall shape of the event, the dynamics of each match and the relationship between matches. The order should make sense and the structure should take the audience on a journey. A well booked show in my estimation has a kind of seamlessness where the individual stories make sense together. It is through booking that the booker expresses their idea of what wrestling is. Booking can also therefore be a way to make a statement or create change.*



Figure 34 Wrestler Gene Munny ponders some particularly complex booking instructions backstage at a Wrestling Resurgence event.

In modern professional wrestling, where storytelling conventions have been more clearly defined, booking has taken on greater significance. Sharon Mazer for example notes how the job of the booker and promoter 'became to build an event that would provoke a passionate response in a committed, repeat audience' (1998, p.25). This is the collective goal of all booking and promotion: to draw an audience, to engage them fully in the matches and ultimately to ensure they return

repeatedly. To achieve this, bookers and promoters work together with the wrestlers they book to create compelling storylines and exciting match-stories. It is rarely sufficient to only assemble a match card and hope the audience turns up. The more effective approach is to use storytelling to explain why matches are taking place and why the audience should pay to see them.

Wrestler Bret Hart explains how he was taught how to book by the person in charge of his father's wrestling promotion: 'he stressed the simple things like when it made sense for a wrestler to bleed, or get juice; how to work a match, an angle, a program; when to do a count-out or a disqualification; who should go over and who shouldn't; and not to repeat the same things week after week and risk boring fans' (Hart, 2007, p.37). Hart reveals key aspects of wrestling storytelling that relate to booking. This can be summarised as pertaining to narrative, plot, character and outcomes. The question of whether one wrestler should bleed or how the match should end, a count-out or a disqualification, are examples of how the booker contributes to this. If the goal is to tell the story of two wrestlers feuding over time, then often an unsatisfactory finish like a count-out can be used to delay the audience's gratification until a later date. This concerns both storyline and an eventual 'pay off'<sup>63</sup> at the end. Hart's statement shows that booking is active across wrestling's storytelling architecture, and that booking requires consideration and negotiation between the narratives of individual matches, the plot of a storyline and the demands of any wider story encompassing multiple matches and events. Each element must work together to give the appearance of a cohesive whole which supporters and performers can willingly participate in.

In independent wrestling booking remains vital but is associated with new practices and approaches. Wrestler Tom Dawkins tells me he teaches new wrestlers to imagine wrestling as a triangle, the goal being to work together to tell the stories required: 'you've got your promoter, audience and the wrestler, and you want every idea to hit smack in the middle of this triangle... and everyone must

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<sup>63</sup> In keeping with the business-like language of wrestling, to 'pay off' is to satisfactorily resolve a story at a moment that guarantees the biggest emotional response from the audience. Booking the finish to matches, is a game of continuing stories or paying them off.

benefit' (Dawkins, 2021). Kit MacFarlane notes how in wrestling there are the 'companies providing the larger narrative framework' and the individual wrestlers 'around whom the contextualising narrative revolves' (2012, p.138). While Dawkins is not a promoter or booker, his experience within the industry is valuable. The lines between each part of his triangle are delicate. He tells me that 'the promoter will know what they want and then the booker will negotiate and work out how to get to that end result' (Dawkins, 2021). This suggests the idea of booking as a way of balancing the different demands of the promoter, the wrestlers and the audience. Interestingly, from his wrestler perspective, Dawkins sees the traditional role of the booker (typically performed by a wrestler) as diminished and almost disappearing in today's independent wrestling industry. He also thinks 'a lot of promoters aren't good bookers' (Dawkins, 2021). Without wanting to make this a point of contention, I would gently push back. Firstly, by suggesting that, rather than diminished or disappearing, it is more the case that it is changing, and secondly by pointing out that many wrestlers, in my experience, are not good bookers either<sup>64</sup>. To better understand the changing process of booking, and how it functions within independent British wrestling, I identified two wrestling promoters to help me understand the booking process and the role it performs in the promotions they run.

Chris East, the promoter of Midlands-based independent wrestling promotion Good Wrestling (Good), has utilised a distinctive booking and storytelling style to create a wrestling brand with a clearly defined ethos and aesthetic. Entering wrestling from the comedy industry, East had a particular vision for his promotion. Central to Good's appeal is the intimacy that comes from running small venues. East tells me Good is 'supposed to be a small wrestling show that doesn't feel like an amateur wrestling show' (East, 2021). The events take place in the one hundred and thirty capacity

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<sup>64</sup> Though the majority, in my experience, think they are.

Craufurd Arms pub in Milton Keynes, as well as occasional ‘no-ring’<sup>65</sup> events in London that are even smaller still.

Josh Bevan is owner, promoter and co-booker of Riptide Wrestling (Riptide) based in Brighton.

Bevan also entered wrestling as an outsider, with his background as a musician and gig promoter (indicative of this is perhaps his preference for the title producer over booker). Operating in a larger venue (The Brighthelm Centre), and with a bigger budget, prior to the pandemic Riptide drew regular crowds of around three hundred people and was known for its cinematic video-on-demand offer. Bevan is clear in expressing the values of his company: ‘you have a focus on inclusivity, a focus on quality, and a focus on community’ (Bevan, 2021). Bevan shares East’s exacting concern for how events are presented, accusing other promotions of being ‘wasteful’ in terms of how they present matches (Bevan, 2021).

Both Bevan and East are drawn specifically to a kind of cultural capital that is often attached to the word ‘independent’, such as its association with DIY aesthetics and typically progressive (though not always) political values. When entering the scene, Bevan, for example, assumed the independent sub-genre was ‘going to be a shit version of the thing that you don’t like anymore (WWE)’ (Bevan, 2021). It was only when attending an adult focused show in a music venue that it suddenly made sense to him: ‘I was like, oh wow, this is what I do. This is the world that I inhabit’ (Bevan, 2021).

Bevan’s own approach became about focusing on detail. As he put it, ‘just caring about these things (presentation) and about the effect that they have and wanting them to be good’ (Bevan, 2021). East shared similar views, telling me how when it comes to his taste in art, music and wrestling, ‘I’m not a huge fan of virtuosity, I like things to feel amateur, I like to see fingerprints on things’<sup>66</sup> (East, 2021).

In attracting audiences to Good and Riptide, East and Bevan book to a clear sensibility: the tone is

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<sup>65</sup> Good’s signature no ring shows forgo the ubiquitous wrestling ring in favour of a small square of floorspace covered in mats and surround by fans sat on the floor.

<sup>66</sup> East’s style is not just expressed in the events themselves; it carries over into aspects like the graphics used to advertise ticket. Further emphasising the DIY ethos, East does all the design for Good himself, and tells me ‘if I’m going to do this, I want it to like feel personal, to feel like only we could have done this’.

often comedic, the aesthetics DIY, the politics on the left, and the music, like the action, is loud. Both promoters are drawn to wrestling because it speaks to their individual identities and their place within a collective of like-minded people. The values of this community shape how they book events and how they promote them.

In thinking deeply about the overall experience, the stagecraft, and the cultural position of their events, Bevan and East support the idea that booking now reaches beyond just assembling cards of matches and writing storylines. For these promoters, booking is closely connected to promotional strategy, and therefore elements like the venue, how the audience experiences the room, the lighting and the music, must reflect the aesthetics the booker has in mind when creating matches and stories. For example, when considering the experience of Good audiences, East told me 'I want you to feel like the people you are there with at the show are on top of you, and then sometimes the wrestlers are also on top of you. We want everyone to feel safe, but also be like maybe this isn't quite safe' (East, 2021). This interplay between the types of wrestlers and matches, stories told, and the setting and presentation, indicates that while there is a clear relationship between wrestlers and tickets sold, it is also crucial that promotion is a draw. This is one reason why booking and promotion are increasingly blurred in today's independent wrestling scene. Describing this idea of booking in terms of the whole event experience, East tells me he wants people to 'feel like this is all on the verge of falling to pieces, even if it's not, even if that's complete artifice, I want you to be tricked into thinking this is running on a highwire<sup>67</sup> and this could just go wrong at any minute' (East, 2021).

In terms of creating a promotion that attracts audiences, East uses a very personal style of booking. Humour for example is a key part of Good's success. In describing his philosophy East gravitates toward words like 'absurdist', telling me how wrestling is 'inherently ridiculous... So why not have some fun with that?' (East, 2021). As a booker then, East embraces wrestling's chaotic qualities and

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<sup>67</sup> This sense of risk further highlights wrestling's connection to other 'dangerous' forms of popular theatre, such as tightrope, trapeze, daredevil acts, lion-taming, etc.

is not afraid to poke holes in the worked artifice wrestling traditionally cultivates. This means booking wrestlers that share his sense of humour, booking matches with comedic stipulations, alongside a variety of other genres and styles, including hardcore matches and more technical bouts.

East also describes the practical requirements that come with the task of booking: assembling and managing a roster of talent, planning the stories that make up a show and how different tones and styles of matches work together. East sees booking as key to how he tells stories within his events. It concerns 'matchmaking' in the first instance, but must also work to explain 'why is X fighting Y?' (East, 2021). East advocates working closely with wrestlers, he tells me Good have 'a core group that we work with on a regular basis' (East, 2021). This is typically called a 'roster', and while for independent promotions rosters are made up of freelance performers, which makes them more fluid than mainstream wrestling, a 'core group' can give shows consistency, and allow for stories to be booked across events, rather than just as isolated matches. Here Bevan describes his approach to assembling a roster: 'it's about performers that excite you and performers that are liable to get what we do' (Bevan, 2021). He is also clear about how this helps the audience, whether familiar or unfamiliar with the product, in terms of storytelling: 'you want to be telling a story that rewards people that are along for the journey, but you don't want it to be impenetrable for a first timer' (Bevan, 2021). Rosters benefit the audience, but also make long-term booking a more effective strategy for the promoter. For example, East values the relationships that having a core group creates, giving him 'an understanding of what they (the wrestlers) want to do, what their strengths are and what ideas they might be bringing' (East, 2021). This reveals how booking is more than just matchmaking and creating stories, it requires interpersonal skills, including managing and developing talent and fostering an environment where wrestlers can do their best work. East notes how initially this was something he found challenging. He told me how when Good started he 'had grand ideas for twisting narratives', storylines which would 'play out over eighteen months, and when it all pays off, nobody will see it coming' (East, 2021). However, once in the thick of it, the reality of booking independent wrestling quickly became apparent and the ambition of complex

long-term narratives 'just goes out the window' (East, 2021). Indicative again of the vital relationship between booker and wrestler, East tells me how at that early juncture, simply 'nobody trusted us' (East, 2021). East learnt from this, and as he became more experienced and gained the trust of the wrestlers he was working with, he acquired a better understanding of the demands that come with booking independent wrestling. Here he describes in detail the pressures bookers face and how he now approaches them:

You make all these plans, best laid plans, and nothing goes right, and somebody that you counted on working for every show for a-year-and-a-half ends up signed (with a mainstream company such as WWE) or injured or retired or changing their name or you fall out with them, or they get cancelled. So, we got to the point where we would put together outlines for where we wanted to be in four or five shows time, but we always need to maintain flexibility and understand that we may need to change all of it. (East, 2021)

Here we see both the challenges of booking independent wrestling, and strategies for navigating them, chiefly the need to maintain flexibility. Both Bevan and East are keen to emphasise how the independent scene is precarious. Losing talent to mainstream companies is something Bevan has grown particularly weary of. When discussing the booking of women wrestlers specifically, Bevan describes how going into 2019 he had reached a point where as much as half the Riptide roster were women and 'they were stars to the room (the Riptide) audience, then eight of the ten women on that roster got signed to exclusive contracts' (Bevan, 2021). Often in cases like this, to be successful as a booker is about navigating the inherent instability of a highly volatile labour pool and reacting in the correct way when changes become necessary. Speaking briefly from my own experience, I have booked shows where every single match on the original card has had to change in some way due to cancellations resulting from a variety of factors, including injury, signings or the infuriating double-booking scenario.<sup>68</sup> Under these circumstances booking requires an instinctive understanding of

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<sup>68</sup> In my experience, gifted storytellers in wrestlers may be rare, but gifted administrators are almost unheard of. The double-booking refers to those times when a wrestler messages you a few weeks before a show to inform you that they

what fans want, an encyclopaedic knowledge of what talent is available across the scene and the ability to improvise last minute.

By learning to book and understanding the possibilities and limitations that come with the role, both Bevan and East eventually found success. East for example in creating the type of ‘twisting narratives’ he desired when first entering professional wrestling, and Bevan in terms of creating stories that ‘took the handles off reality’, but remained grounded in his promotion’s locality (Bevan, 2021). Success in booking appears to be closely related to balancing the needs of the performer with the desires of the audience. Both bookers prize their ability to recognise potentially profitable performances and capitalise on them. East for example tells me that he is always on the lookout for those moments in matches when he is ‘gifted’ something by the performer. He describes these gifts as ‘something that you can just bounce off’ (East, 2021). More than writing stories and putting together dream matches, this idea of gift explains the ability to read a moment of storytelling and imagine where the story might go next. By doing this, booking becomes a way of guiding events forward that is rewarding for the audience, the wrestlers and the company. The dynamic, often reactive, nature of wrestling storytelling enables the booker to change course at the last minute, and hastily rewrite, from one show to another. As such, the booker is always concerned with what happens next. The next section explores two specific examples of booking intuitively from Good and Riptide respectively. Good is an example of long form booking, and by contrast, Riptide’s narratives take place over a single weekend. The examples demonstrate the effectiveness of both booking processes. It is typical, if not mandatory, for promotions to have championship titles, typically these are ‘gold’ belts worn around the waist or carried over the shoulder.<sup>69</sup> In Good, East took time to introduce a championship, as he felt when they first started, creating a title too early would mean

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have somehow ‘double-booked’ themselves and are committed to working a different show, sometimes hundreds of miles away.

<sup>69</sup> Championships are a key point around which stories are developed and told. The champion is the figurehead, both in storylines, and in the wider reality of the company. The champions match-stories typically occupying the main event slot, adding prestige to these matches.

too little. In lieu of a champion, Gene Munny's story began. It started in 2017 with the introduction of the Gene Munny 'Certificate of Excellence' – his own championship:

the belt was a framed certificate with his (Munny's) face on, which he mounted onto a leather studded belt with some gaffer tape and carried it around as if it were a championship and "defended it", that's heavy quotation marks (verbatim from interview), against all comers (East, 2021).

The 'Certificate of Excellence' started as a humorous gimmick, but around it, Munny and East could start to tell stories. The matches where Munny would defend his certificate, the 'bell-to-bell' part of the show, East tells me was left largely to the wrestler. Here, Gene's buffoonish persona flourished, and his mix of comedy spots, like 'pulling his trousers down' and ability to use vocalisation to get a laugh, quickly made him 'the one out there who's drawing the crowd, the one that's bringing the people in' (East, 2021). East is honest here in recalling how the storyline took off, telling me how he did not expect the Good audience to 'latch onto him in the way they did' and that 'the intention was never for that character to end up being the centre of the show' (East, 2021). After Munny defended his 'Certificate of Excellence' on several shows, it was clear that East had something to capitalise on, a 'gift' (to use his own terminology). As a storytelling process, the booking of Munny became about striking the right balance between comedy and legitimacy; placing suitable obstacles in front of him; and about taking both the character and the audience on a journey. A pivotal part of this storyline came when East decided the story had 'got to a point where he's just going to have to wrestle good matches as well (as the comedic ones)' (East, 2021). He began booking Munny with 'proper wrestlers' (East, 2021). The goal was around legitimacy, and in doing so, he retraced a long-established booking strategy, where a wrestler is taken from a comedic position, to one where they can be taken seriously as a wrestler. As well as using booking to develop Munny's status, East also changed how he was presented, rather than a villain relying on underhand tactics, increasingly his legitimacy, meant also booking him to win without cheating. This created space for Munny to

transition from heel to baby face. The storyline hit its highest moment when Munny defeated the celebrated Canadian wrestler Speed Ball Mike Bailey in a standout bout that received widespread critical acclaim. Through a considered use of long-term booking, the match was enhanced significantly, especially for the audience members that had followed Munny's personal journey from the beginning. Smart booking here made Gene Munny the figure head of Good Wrestling<sup>70</sup> for several years, attracting fans from all over the UK, and building Munny's reputation across the wider UK independent scene.

For Bevan, effective promotion, and engaging booking, are as much about tapping into the wider reality of people's lives as they are about creating entirely fictional storylines. He wants Riptide to be deeply embedded within the reality of Brighton: 'the journey is real. The fans, they meet, the friends they meet are real, everything is real, and it becomes important to them and a feature of peoples' lives' (Bevan, 2021). The example Bevan uses to illustrate this is a series of two matches he booked between British wrestler Chakara and the more experienced North American Big Swole. It took place over a single weekend, split into two matches, one on a Friday and the second the following night. It is a moment of storytelling that Bevan describes as 'one of the proudest things we've achieved' (Bevan, 2021). Over the course of these matches, working together, Bevan, Chakara and Swole took the Chakara character, which until that point had been booked as a heel, and turned her into a hero. This is another established booking technique, but it is notoriously difficult to pull off during a match alone as its success hinges on the audience's desire to cheer a person who has until that point actively antagonised them. In explaining why Bevan came to this decision, he tells me how he felt 'the crowd were ready for it, they wanted to celebrate her' (Bevan, 2021). This reveals how bookers must be able to interpret the desires of the audience and anticipate when to change the story. Equally important is understanding the needs of the performer, and in Chakara's case, he tells me 'this person wants this; this person deserves this' (Bevan, 2021).

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<sup>70</sup> At one point East booked an entire show as a tournament to determine the top contender to Munny's certificate of excellence.

The night of the first show, Chakara walked out to her match with Big Swole to a deafening chorus of boos. By the time the bell had rung on the final bout 24 hours later, Chakara was treated to a standing ovation with supporters in the audience reportedly brought to tears. In match terms, the first bout was a typical heel face dynamic, with Chakara cheating to try and win. However, after the match, the possibility for a turn was created, with Swole delivering the following succinct promo:

Tonight, I'm gonna give you one chance to beat Big Swole fair and square. One chance to show me the REAL Chakara. If you do not come with your A-game, I will beat your ass again.  
(Riptide Wrestling, 2019)

Evidence to support the power of this wrestled story is born out in the social media reaction:

'Tonight @chakarawrestler & @SwoleWorld broke me. What a match! Reminded me of everything I love about wrestling!' (Riptide supporter via Twitter, 2019.) Supporters who accessed the match after the fact via Riptides acclaimed filmed content concurred, 'Heard people in the venue who saw it live were in tears. Can confirm the match does the same for those watching at home.' (Digital viewer, Riptide Facebook). As well as evidencing the importance Bevan attaches to the interplay between fiction and reality in wrestling storytelling, this also illustrates East's earlier emphasis on flexibility and reading and listening to the audience. Further, the strength of feeling in the room and online demonstrates how while wrestling audiences clearly know that what they are seeing is a story, the reality of their investment, especially in the characters, is undeniably real.

The data gathered from my interviews with East and Bevan shows wrestling booking to be a vital creative force. I see my own booking philosophy reflected in their experiences. However, booking often remains grounded in orthodoxy: strategies might have an original twist, but are still guided by approaches used successfully by bookers in the past. This is a strength of wrestling, that it is a storytelling based on retelling, that links with a far-reaching history and culture, but that does not mean it is impossible to think beyond established conventions. So, conceptually, how could booking be pushed further? If it is possible to use booking to approach wrestling in new ways, then it would

first have to address the question of power. Booking involves hiring wrestlers, arranging matches, ordering event line ups, determining winners and losers, developing stories and awarding championships. Because of this, promoters and bookers wield significant power across the industry. Sharon Mazer suggests that power 'lies not in the ring at all but rather in the hands of the promoter whose purchase of a wrestler includes the right to dictate his success or failure' (Mazer, 1998, p.153). While this is partially true, there is undoubtedly some power in the ring, as despite outcomes being fixed, wrestlers on the independent scene do typically retain agency over who they work with and for, what moves they perform and what match-story they tell. Further complicating this, promoters, and bookers each come with powers that are often specific to individual companies, therefore making assumptions risks overlooking the idiosyncratic nature of the industry<sup>71</sup>.

What is undeniable is the relationship between profit and power. Mazer here describes how the promoter/booker wields substantial power as the person who 'hires and fires, who decides a wrestler's place on the card and who doles out the pay check' (Mazer, 1998, p.25). East, Bevan and I, buy the performance of each wrestler for our shows. Promoters pay each wrestler a fee for their performance. Generally, though not exclusively, the fee is set by the wrestler. Promoters then sell tickets, the income from which goes to us, not the wrestlers. While it is certainly the case that some promotions make significant profits from independent wrestling, those companies are often the exception. It is more common for companies to simply break even.<sup>72</sup> Importantly here, such transactions between companies and wrestlers and between companies and audiences are not exclusively monetary. All parties also extract profit in intangible forms that are often more difficult to quantify, such as status and reputation, artistic satisfaction, and the pure enjoyment derived from being a wrestler and running wrestling shows.

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<sup>71</sup> For example, a report by the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group on wrestling highlights British wrestling highlights the stubborn persistence of promoters exploiting wrestlers financially either by renegeing on bookings or demanding lower wages than those typical charged by wrestlers.

<sup>72</sup> It is not my intention to provide in depth analysis of the financial status of British independent wrestling nor to deny that some companies do profit significantly, here I can only speak to the specific examples of Good and Resurgence, even if I know anecdotally this to be the case for the majority of independent wrestling companies.

The power exerted by promoters and bookers has further implications in terms of who is booked and who is doing the booking. While it can be argued that Good, Riptide and Resurgence have, for the most part, cards that feature a diversity of race and gender, all three are booked by white men. If booking can practise a form of curatorial resistance, the forces of misogyny, sexism, homophobia and racism that have troubled much of its past, and stubbornly persist in the present, must be acknowledged. Carrie Dunn, writing within the UK independent scene, but in terms applicable to all wrestling, notes how wrestling's 'scripted performance of physical power is, on the whole created by men – the "bookers" of the show' (2017, p.95). Heather Bandenburg sees this is an inescapable reality of wrestling, that while progress has been made in terms of representation, though seldom enough, the power backstage remains overwhelmingly dominated by white heterosexual men (Bandenburg, 2020, p.153). In the UK, even all-women wrestling promotions such as Pro-Wrestling: EVE, despite being a significant and important space where Bandenburg notes women fight 'without that being the gimmick in itself', the company is still promoted and booked by a man (2020, p.156). This continued marginalisation of wrestlers has a profound effect on the collaborative creativity central to booking. Bevan told me frankly that Riptide at the time of the interview was 'still dominated by straight white males' (Bevan, 2021). Noting the systemic nature of this kind of marginalisation, he tells me how he thinks 'most promotions don't confront their unconscious bias' (Bevan, 2021). He sees this as a kind of self-perpetuating effect, where often marginalised wrestlers are given less opportunities, meaning their profile is typically smaller, and they are less attractive to bookers hoping to secure ticket sales by featuring established stars. As well as influencing who gets booked, Bevan says that marginalisation often effects storytelling. For example, in Bevan's experience, non-white male wrestlers are 'significantly less likely to pitch ideas' (Bevan, 2021). He suspects that this is because those wrestlers, which includes women, people of colour and LGBTQIA+ people 'haven't been valued in the industry', which leads to a lack of confidence in making their ideas for stories heard (Bevan, 2021). Here Bevan's emphasis on locality means he often books based on the perceived values of his audience. For example, he positioned a prominent LGBTQIA+

wrestler in the role of top babyface and booked against him an antagonist who implied that he supported the British Conservative Party, something that both booker and workers knew would antagonise the mostly left-wing followers of Riptide. In doing this, Bevan deliberately exploited the geo-political make-up of the city for storytelling purposes – Brighton is notable for having the UK's only Green Party MP and for its spectacular annual Gay Pride Festival.

That bookers need to balance the makeup of their roster with the demands of their audience creates complicated power dynamics. For example, Laine and Chow note in relation to the ultra-violent practices of hardcore wrestling that 'the promoter seeks to extract surplus value from the excessive labour of the wrestler' (Chow & Laine, 2014, p.49). I would extend this, in that value is extracted within all types of wrestling. Further, they note the complexity of this notion of value, connecting it to the role of fans. Here, 'the demand of the fan becomes synonymous with the demand of the promoter' (Chow & Laine, 2014, p.49). The demand in this context may come from the supposed extra 'authenticity' attached to bloodletting in hardcore wrestling, but there are similar demands placed on all wrestling actions. Chow and Laine call this an 'economy of performance', where the interests of audiences, promoters and wrestlers collide and ultimately each seeks a different kind of affirmation, including comedy, kinship and identity (Chow & Laine, 2014, p.49).

If booking can overcome problematic aspects of past practices, then understanding this complex question of values and transactions is vital. In-ring storytelling inevitably evokes an audience reaction, in terms of what they see in the ring and their participation in it. Here there is 'a demand for labour in excess of the representation' (i.e., such as 'authenticity'); and demand for access [insight] into to the non-representation part of the world of wrestling (i.e., the backstage, the politics and power relations (Chow & Laine, 2014, p.52). This economics of performance for East, speaking in this instance as a fan as much as a booker, is critical to the enjoyment of wrestling storytelling:

Wrestling fans don't just want the story as it's presented, they want the story behind the stories as well. That's part of the story to them. I know that when I'm thinking about other

wrestling companies, I'm not just thinking about the story that the show is trying to tell me.

I'm also thinking about how we've got to this point backstage, what cogs have landed in place? (East, 2021)

Booking here acts as a critical frame used to break down the events in terms of how the audience experiences them. Related closely to the concept of 'kayfabe', this scrutiny of booking could be likened to the kind of meta-narratives and sub-plots that dominate most sports-media, where fans are interested in following the wider stories of sports managers and team-owners as well as the performance of their team on the field of play. As booking came to be known more widely through insider 'dirt-sheet' magazines and newsletters, and among internet forums frequented by engaged followers, debating the nuances of booking decisions became a way for fans to lament or celebrate the direction of a wrestling company's storytelling. Mazer points out how this becomes 'one of the very real pleasures peculiar to wrestling: the experience of being angry about how the booker sees the roles of the wrestlers and directions of the storylines' (2017, p.201). There is a tension to this, where promoters seek to exert power, while balancing the fans 'desire to experience the breakdown of control' (1998, p.23). For Mazer, by booking outcomes, the booker negates 'the possibility of any genuine contest' and that this is indicative of the fan's broader experiences of society, that 'the game that is wrestling, the game of life, at least its finish, is almost certainly fixed' (2005, p.71). That is certainly one way of viewing this, though I would argue also for a more positive interpretation: That as a kind of discursive practice, fans, and indeed wrestlers and promoters, gain great pleasure from fantasy booking, from being insiders and from accessing areas of the performance often closed off to them. In this way, professional wrestling's foregrounding of the backstage, could perhaps go some way towards explaining the recent success of major sports documentaries, like Amazon's *All or Nothing* documentary series.

## A curatorial act of resistance

That promoters have used exploitive practices such as booking to the detriment of talent, and to wrestling, is written clearly across the history of wrestling. Ideas around labour, economics and power relations dominate the vernacular, present through the language of business that dominates industry jargon and often what it tells stories about. However, to only frame booking as a practice of employment, and a largely exploitive one at that, risks overlooking its latent potential as a force for countering wrestling's problematic past, reconnecting the ring with the changing world outside it. Booking is a way to express values, to gain cultural and creative satisfaction, a way to engage audiences as part of the storytelling process. It is therefore also a performance economy of exchange where values are shared, folded back into the stories told. Booking is, therefore, in my view, a powerful tool that, when used effectively, can reshape and reimagine the form.

The first Wrestling Resurgence events, which took place in the venue where I was employed as a curator, forced me to reconcile the question – why was a curator running wrestling shows? To my surprise, I found more commonalities than conflicts, and as the events grew, the overlaps became obvious. Despite the close relationship between wrestling and theatre, I do not have a theatre background<sup>73</sup> and my approach is instead informed by my experience of visual art.<sup>74</sup> This is not as big a stretch as it might first appear. This carries over into storytelling, where visual elements are privileged over spoken words and dialogue. I now work more in wrestling than in visual arts, but I continue to apply a curatorial eye to wrestling – especially through the process of booking.

Increasingly, in popular culture the term 'curate' has become a catch-all for various processes of arrangement, collecting, exhibiting and compilation. In his brief history of the word 'curator', Tom Morton notes how it is now applied to 'anyone from a celebrity music festival programmer to a Williamsburg hipster with an iTunes account' (T. Morton, 2011, n.p). According to art historian

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<sup>73</sup> Several ancillary members of the team do have this background, and Resurgence co-producer John Kirby is the lead programmer for a small-scale theatre company.

<sup>74</sup> And many Saturdays playing wrestling with action figures.

Annette von Tietenberg, as a 'vogue word', curating increasingly 'conjures up an upscale lifestyle, a jet-set life and an elegant way out of the dead-end of directive-bound gainful employment' (von Tietenberg, 2020, n.p). They note further that given this ubiquity, and its association with a politics of aspiration, it is unsurprising that the term now attracts 'scorn and ridicule' (von Tietenberg, 2020, n.p). Testament to the degradation of the term, comedian Stewart Lee, when asked to 'curate' a comedy festival responded by saying 'I am a curator. What a dead word. It sounds like somebody stirring turds in a toilet bowl with a stick' (Lee via Morton, 2011, n.p).

While I'm not so damning in my assessment of this curatorial turn, I am conscious of becoming complicit in its proliferation and the gentrification of a form like wrestling that is historically working-class.<sup>75</sup> I do not view myself as a curator of wrestling, rather as a creative practitioner who views curatorial resistance as key to their approach. How I work as a booker is therefore informed by my background, my interests and my expertise. In relation to wrestling, the use of terms curator and curating, can be read as grounded in the context of art history and museology (implying the idea of care and custodianship), but also as a more fluid process attached to the idea of curatorial practice – for example curating that brings together artworks to tell a story (typically in the form of an exhibition). In this context, booking is assembling a roster of wrestlers, a ring, a stage, a lighting rig, and an audience to form the wrestling event. As a curator it is necessary to be a networker and relationship builder working to bridge institutional requirements with the needs of artists. Booking a wrestling company also demands all these aptitudes. Curators must balance broad knowledge of art history, theory and politics, with more specific knowledge of individual artists and disciplines. This requires eclecticism, adapting to the specific intellectual demands of the subjects of each exhibition or project. In wrestling it is an understanding of how wrestling uses storytelling and what it might be possible to tell stories about, and knowledge of wrestling's rich history, including what has worked in the past. Finally, there are the practical demands of event making, such as scenography, lighting

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<sup>75</sup> An accusation that was levelled at international gallery Nottingham Contemporary when they hosted a Wrestling Resurgence show for the first time.

design, project finance, marketing and risk management (von Tietenberg, 2020, n.p). All these competencies are applicable to the job I do as booker of Wrestling Resurgence.

Booking I argue, has the potential to act as a tool for reshaping the wrestling industry. Matchmaking for example is an aspect of booking not just for the purpose of entertaining an audience but the facilitation of a collaboration between two artists. As is the case when curating artworks, there are multiple considerations to balance, from the overall aesthetic of the wrestlers together in the ring, to the chosen styles, physical characteristics and personality traits. Another key is the curation of match cards. When it comes to considering the composition of wrestling events, my own approach, comes from reading wrestling through British variety theatre and music hall. Writing in his history of variety Oliver Double offers a pertinent artistic analogy: 'if conventional narrative theatre is painting, variety is collage. Collages are not entirely random, and the juxtapositions involve composition and aesthetic judgement' (2012, p.20). Further, taking matchmaking and match card creation together, booking can become a platform to enable wrestlers to tell diverse stories.

Curating now extends beyond traditional ideas of custodianship and conservation; as Annette Tietenberg puts it, today's curators are 'nourished by aesthetic experience, sensual knowledge and communicative practice' (Tietenberg, 2020, n.p). By treating booking as an act of curation, what might this offer to wrestling as a creative practice? Curating now is 'always aimed at creating a public sphere' (Tietenberg, 2020, n.p). How might progressive bookers contribute to the development of wrestling as a community that is more inclusive and more critical of the issues that have led to the discriminatory practices associated with it. Thinking about wrestling work in these terms, opens the possibility for wrestling to become a more socially aware cultural practice, potentially leading to the cultivation of 'temporary heterogeneous communities of production and reception' (Tietenberg, 2020, n.p).

That sexism, racism, misogyny and homophobia came to be synonymous with professional wrestling in popular culture is undeniable. However, through small acts of resistance, storytelling can address

this and demonstrate ways that a more inclusive wrestling culture might be forged. Thinking about wrestling booking as a force for creating change in the industry, suggests the idea that wrestling might constitute a form of 'participatory art'. This is not new in relation to wrestling audiences: Aleksi Vauhkoenen's thesis for example, "'You Can't Wrestle!" – Professional Wrestling as Participatory Fiction' (2018), connects participation with socially engaged art practice. Discussing the theories of art historian Claire Bishop, Vauhkoenen sees wrestling as undeniably a performance form that engages the audience 'as a fundamental element of the fictional world it presents' (2018, p.69). However, while this participation gives the audience a degree of agency in terms of its co-creative role in the storytelling process, he concludes by suggesting that mainstream wrestling cannot be claimed to generate 'palpable communal change' and that it is 'not the goal of any professional wrestling project to do so' (2018, p.70). Here it is worth pointing out, how Vauhkoenen's claim stands at odds to the testimony of fans cited earlier in this chapter. Those that took to social media to express their emotions over the Riptide storyline involving Chakara. This also begs the wider question, what if it was the goal of professional wrestling to create change within the industry?



Figure 35: The *Everything Pattered* roster celebrate Roy Johnson after his main event match.

Stepping back into the independent wrestling scene, I believe there is compelling evidence that professional wrestling can exhibit qualities of socially engaged art, and that the curatorial act of booking and the storytelling that this can create, is central to that argument. How then, might a progressive approach to wrestling cultivate the kind of ‘temporary heterogenous communities of production and reception’ noted by Tietenberg in relation to curatorial practice? (Tietenberg, 2020, n.p.) I claim that this is the case, and to evidence it, I offer the 2019 Arts Council England supported project *Everything Pattered* as a case study.

*Everything Pattered* was conceived by British independent wrestler Roy Johnson in direct response to a lack of diversity within British wrestling, particularly around the inclusion of people of colour, and his own lived experience of being a black person within the wrestling community. While it might appear tenuous to claim that in the short space of time since *Everything Pattered* (just over three years between the show and the time of writing), that diversity across the scene has increased, but I think it has changed, albeit with substantial work still to do. In the years immediately prior to

*Everything Patterned*, as British Wrestling rapidly grew in popularity and visibility, it was common for wrestling events to feature all white cards, as well as typically only one women's match. Having approached Johnson in 2019 about the possibility of developing a project for Black History Month, Resurgence became a platform to discuss representation, and champion Black British wrestling, with Johnson as the booker of the show. Around Johnson's ideas, a funding bid was developed.

*Everything Patterned* would feature a roster made up entirely of Black wrestlers. Supporting this was a series of short films and a publication exploring issues central to the project. In an interview for *Everything Patterned*, Johnson describes how he sees diversity as vital, not just in terms of equality, but also the long-term popularity and health of the whole scene. Here Johnson lays out the context for *Everything Patterned*:

Diversity is important to British Wrestling to ensure its survival. We know we have seen that it has grown in the last three or four years or so, but what people have not realised is that the growth has plateaued. Outside of a few more niche promotions, British Wrestling continues to pull fans from the same, slowly dwindling, fan-base. For British Wrestling to grow, its target market needs to grow also. To do that it needs to cater better to new markets. Whether that be women, the LGBTQ+ community or ethnic minorities. (Johnson, 2019)

Acting as the project manager, as well as being the funding applicant, my job was to facilitate the ancillary elements and provide administrative support to *Everything Patterned*. Rather than speak in general terms, the films commissioned by *Everything Patterned* and essay by Janine Bradbury from the *Everything Patterned* publication, will provide the evidence for a fresh examination of agency and power. Here we see how too often booking has been a tool for exclusion, but also ways it might offer resistance. This idea of booking as an act of curatorial resistance, was critical to *Everything Patterned*. It was how Johnson was given agency to book the show he envisaged and for the wrestlers to tell the stories they wanted to tell.

The power of the booker, historically white, straight and male, has for many been central to how people of colour have been excluded from wrestling. In his interview for *Everything Patterned*, North American wrestler Darius Lockhart is unequivocal, 'You think of every sport, every sport, and you think of some of the greatest athletes in that particular sport, there's a Black person that comes to mind' (Lockhart, 2019, n.p). However, in professional wrestling this is not the case, while there are undoubtedly names of Black wrestlers that have done well, they are in the minority to a far greater extent than any other equivalently popular and enduring sport. So, what makes wrestling, though not a sport but clearly sport-inspired, so different? For Lockhart, this comes back to the question of wrestling's 'worked' nature, 'now you're telling me there's one sport, where people get to determine the outcome, and black people are not at the top... the math kind of does itself' (Lockhart, 2019). Let's be clear on this point, the prospects of Black wrestlers within the wrestling industry have been stalled, derailed, marginalised, by a clear institutional racism. With the centrality of booking and promotion in terms of ascribing success, opportunities and status, this racism is clearly linked to the imbalance of power that exists at the level of booking and promotion.



Figure 36: 'The Revolutionary' Darius Lockhart

The application of power stemming from the choices of bookers and promoters is not limited to just who is booked for shows, the match they are booked in, the status of the match on the event card, and the outcome. For Lockhart, the racism that occurs within this can be more pervasive, 'the Black people that are getting opportunities, they are still pigeon holed into this 'lane' of Blackness, they only get to be one way of Blackness' (Lockhart, 2019). This is directly linked to booking, as it is about how black wrestlers' work is framed for the audience. Lockhart notes, for example, the tendency for Black wrestlers to be labelled based purely on their physical credentials, 'how many times have you heard a black wrestler being called "athletic"? It's literally all we are ever called' (Lockhart, 2019). Even when Black wrestlers are given more defined character roles to perform, such as in mainstream

wrestling companies like WWE, Janine Bradbury, notes how the ‘long held stereotypes of black men as buffoonish clowns, as brutes who lust after white women, as race rebels who seek the destruction of whiteness, endure throughout’ (Bradbury, 2019, n.p). On the independent scene, where wrestlers often gain greater creative control over their own personas, Black performers are often more empowered to push back against this kind of stereotyping. Lockhart through his ‘Revolutionary’ moniker is an embodiment of this. His performance persona is itself an act of resistance, stating clearly ‘if I’m sitting here and I’m proud to be Black and I say that, wear it on my sleeve, and there’s no hiding from it, no running away’ (Lockhart, 2019, n.p). In this way, through his actions in and around the wrestling space, and enabled by platforms like *Everything Patterned*, under the booking of progressive minded figures like Johnson, ‘The Revolutionary’ becomes a powerful catalyst for change.



Figure 37: Chakara and Man Like Dereiss battle during their match for *Everything Patterned*

Bringing together wrestling’s under-representation of colour, together with the same long history in terms of gender, Bradbury is clear that Black women in the wrestling industry, ‘have been chronically underrepresented and misrepresented’ and ‘have had to negotiate the extent to which they are

willing to indulge the racial imaginary of predominantly white audiences’ (Bradbury, 2019 ,n.p). At the time that Johnson booked *Everything Patterned* for example, there were only four established black women wrestlers working regularly in the UK. Chakara, one of the UK scene’s successful women of colour at the time of *Everything Patterned*, has experienced these challenges first hand. Out of all but one of the promotions she worked for, only two had ever booked her as a babyface, and only one consistently. Despite being cast as the villain, she says that ‘once I started training, I always wanted to be a face. I always wanted to be the good guy, like John Cena you know (laughs)’ (Warden & West, 2020, n.p.). Reflecting on this further, for her *Everything Patterned* interview, she recalls her early experiences watching wrestling, ‘I really wish there were more Black female wrestlers at the time when I was 5, 6, 7 years old, that I could have looked up to, that I could have related to, I really do’ (Chakara, 2019, n.p.). Chakara now recognises the strength of telling her story and the power that this can have when told in the ring, with the booking it deserves, especially for the next generation of Black wrestlers, ‘it’s about looking to the future, and being able to, for me now as a wrestler, to step up, and be that person at the forefront, to inspire other young, Black, female talent’ (Chakara, 2019, n.p.).

By enabling the booking of Roy Johnson, and the work of wrestlers such as Lockhart, and Chakara, projects like *Everything Patterned* demonstrate a wrestling art that can reach outside of the ring and effect changing within society. Bradbury places the significance of this in terms of the history I have touched upon and, through *Everything Patterned*, she notes, we are ‘witnessing self-defined performers – men and women – shaping their own image, dropping their own promos, and expressing themselves free from the constraints of institutionally prohibitive promoters’ (Bradbury, 2019, n.p). The evidence gathered here, framed by the idea of booking as an act of curatorial resistance, brings into sharp focus the urgency that Johnson had in mind when he first conceived of a wrestling event made up entirely of Black wrestlers, that offered a visible platform for diverse stories and storytelling. This is wrestling with purpose and urgency. Following the first iteration, *Everything Patterned*, under Johnson’s continued stewardship, is now approaching its fourth, as well

as inspiring Game Changer Wrestling's North American shows 'For the Culture', which is now on its third iteration.

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted how booking is an overlooked element in wrestling scholarship which demands greater attention if the field is to fully understand wrestling storytelling and creativity.

Booking is precisely the process of selecting wrestlers, managing those wrestlers, creating matches, and turning those matches into wrestling events. Booking in this sense is architectural, a practice of structure and design, of arrangement and of understanding how all these moving parts should fit together. It is also more than this, it is the way that stories are set in motion and unfold over time. It is subject to economic forces, as well as creative decision-making, requiring an understanding of the needs and demands of audiences and of wrestlers. Given this, booking comes with power and agency, which if unchecked and unchallenged can lead to homogeny, exclusion and exploitation.

This is a significant challenge, but booking itself can provide solutions. Booking, I claim, can become a powerful tool for rethinking what is possible for wrestling as a storytelling art. One that, if done with attention to countering the history of wrestling through ideas of inclusivity and diversity, can be an act of curatorial resistance. The examples included in this chapter are far from exhaustive.

Wrestling as a form of popular entertainment is always a contradiction: on the one hand the conventions of matches, events and storytelling appear to change slowly and in marginal ways over long periods of time; on the other, it is highly unstable, especially in the independent space, with wrestlers at risk of disappearing due to injury or loss of interest and companies folding due to heavy financial burdens and fickle audiences. For example, at the time of writing, Good Wrestling has paused running, Riptide is yet to return to the scene since the pandemic. Chakara has retired from wrestling. Despite this, new companies and new bookers have taken up the challenge of creating change. Heather Bandenburg has created a festival celebrating progressive, inclusive and experimental approaches to wrestling. There are now companies that place the LGBTQIA+ community at their centre, such as Spectrum Wrestling in the UK and Enjoy Wrestling in the US. In

my personal experience, effective booking should strive to be as equitable a collaboration between the promotion and the wrestler as possible. In the next two chapters this is where attention turns to wrestlers and then to the result of those collaborations – the match.

For professional wrestling to continue to develop as a genre, it requires promoters and bookers that come from diverse backgrounds and circumstances. Wrestling in the UK is rooted in working class culture, and this is one of its great strengths. However, if the act of booking is an expression of what the individuals in positions of power considers wrestling to be, and the role it has in wider culture, then increasing diversity would be advantageous. For this to have a lasting impact on how wrestling is perceived within wider culture, further work is required to recognise this increased diversity. Here scholarship has a role to play in critiquing and sharing these models that diverge from current mainstream views of wrestling as a predominantly heterosexual white male form of entertainment.

## CHAPTER FOUR: WRESTLERS



Figure 38: Myself, aged 5 in 1992, sporting Sting-inspired purple wrestling tights and a toy championship belt.

*For Christmas, aged five, I asked for one thing. A wrestling costume inspired by my favourite wrestler, World Championship Wrestling's hero of the early 90s, Sting. I was overjoyed when my wish came true. I was the proud owner of a pair of purple leggings and a toy championship belt. Like the make-believe work of wrestling, I played out with action figures in my bedroom, wrestling was the dominant theme of my play with others, chiefly my long-suffering Dad, always a willing participant, despite his ambivalence to any wrestler other than the technically proficient British grappling Lord Steven Regal. In these moments of play, the living room of our family home in rural Wiltshire was transformed into a wrestling ring, with the door leading from the dining room acting as the entrance way. One on one play wrestling matches were common, but my favourite stipulation was always a*

*Royal Rumble, which is WWE's annual January event. Roping in my younger sister, and true to the WWE version, the three of us, under the exacting scrutiny of my fledging booker's glaze, would take it in turns to enter the match. The goal was to throw your opponent over the top rope (side of the sofa), the last wrestler (family member) remaining was crowned the winner. Chaos would inevitably ensue and the action, much to my mother's despair, would play out all around the room. These kinds of memories, I suspect, are far from unique. Wrestling undoubtedly engenders a child-like imagination, which is not to say that wrestling is childish; rather that I think it is most compelling when it embodies a sort of child-like appreciation of the world. Ultimately what captivated me about professional wrestling were the towering, eye-catching, brightly coloured characters that battled in the ring. It is to the wrestlers that attention now turns.*

To claim that the professional wrestler is central to the art of wrestling storytelling might appear obvious, after all it is the wrestlers that perform match-stories in the ring, and wrestlers that bookers and promoters tell stories about to market their wrestling events. This chapter is an in-depth examination of the work (in all the meanings of the term) of the wrestler. It starts by suggesting that the current framing offered by scholarship on wrestling is overly reliant on the concept of 'gimmick', and therefore, currently does not fully explain wrestler work. Therefore, developing the idea of the performance persona, I offer a more nuanced approach, examining what wrestlers are and what they do. As its overarching claim, the chapter proposes an expanded notion of this unusual profession, based on the idea that wrestlers are 'artist-athletes', with unique performance personas, embedded within a distinct creative industry (Warden, 2022, p.158). Across it, these ideas are developed in relation to data gathered during interviews with three independent wrestlers, each with a unique creative practice. Supporting this are examples from mainstream professional wrestling, wrestling history and the wider independent wrestling scene. Each interviewee contributed to this research as the people behind their wrestling personas. However, their personas remain central to how they understand wrestling, as well as being a subject of the research. At the

time of interview, all three wrestlers were regularly performing on the UK independent wrestling scene for multiple companies, including Wrestling Resurgence.

## Gimmick



*Figure 39: Wrestling Resurgence guest ring announcer Mad Kurt introduces North American wrestler Warhorse. The Warhorse performance persona is both a heavy metal gimmick and an ode to the wrestling music gimmicks of the past.*

Typically, 'gimmick' is wrestling shorthand for an amalgam of character and persona, but it can also describe anything 'worked' or fake within wrestling performance, i.e., a 'gimmicked' table, is one structurally compromised to allow it to break more easily when a wrestler is propelled onto it. In describing what a wrestler represents within a wrestling text (be that an event, a match, a television show), gimmick is the most used analytic frame for character and/or persona. Despite its limitations, given its widespread use within the industry (and its implicit use within scholarship), before moving to a more complex approach that goes beyond it, there is value in fully conceptualising this term. 'Gimmick' can relate to the visual motif adopted by a wrestler, for example, a wrestler's costume (in ring and during entrance), hair and makeup, entrance music (sometimes video), they may also use props that they carry with them to ring. 'Gimmick' can also be attached to physical characteristics, including body shape and type, how the wrestler moves (such as walking around the ring) and their

speech and facial mannerisms. Graphic design is also an area for gimmick to be utilised, with graphics on costumes, used to label t-shirts and other merchandise , on social media, in entrance videos, etc.

The precise word 'gimmick' might not often appear in wrestling scholarship, rather it is implicitly present. Instead, the tendency is toward the term 'character' which is used vaguely to apply to all aspects of a wrestler's identity. Sharon Mazer describes wrestling characters as 'an amalgam between their individual identities and cultural stereotypes' that wrestlers create by 'capitalising on persona idiosyncrasies' (1998, p.88). This somewhat straightforward definition suggests near-endless possibilities for generating characters. However, it also affirms popular beliefs that professional wrestlers are generally themselves, with their 'real' life personality turned up, something I argue shuts off alternative ways of framing character work. Often 'character' and 'gimmick' are used too generally and lack the detail required to appreciate fully what wrestlers are. I argue that what is typically meant when scholars use the word 'character' is in fact closer to wrestling's concept of the 'gimmick'. And that neither are entirely adequate.

'Gimmicks' are another example of wrestling's theatrical ancestry and can be traced back to those moments when the sport became a work and storytelling the form's primary concern. In this early period, gimmick was often bound to locality, i.e., where the show is taking place, and/or where a wrestler is from. The place where wrestling takes place often shapes what stories are told and how they are told. Therefore, nationality and ethnicity have historically been a powerful tool for generating wrestling 'gimmicks'. Early promoters and bookers were known to fake the ethnicity of wrestlers to win the support of local fans of the same ethnicity or to set them up as heels. For Scott M. Beekman, placing promotional emphasis on ethnicity allowed bookers to 'avoid the straightjacket role of rule breaker by pitting them against grapplers from other ethnic groups' (2006, p.65). Despite my research focusing on independent wrestling, WWE (with its long history and wide cultural footprint) makes a useful case study for examining the enduring influence of 'gimmicks' in wrestling

storytelling and sets up interesting examples of gimmick-subversion occurring in independent wrestling.

A particularly rich example of wrestling gimmickry is WWF's flagship extravaganza 'WrestleMania IX'. This edition of the annual event was staged at then Donald Trump owned Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. The venue's ancient Rome theme inspires an all-encompassing 'gimmick' that frames the stagecraft of the whole event. Firstly, the show takes place outside (in keeping with the kind of great solar spectacles Barthes compares wrestling with (2005, p.22)). Reinforcing this, the ring is framed by faux columns, the stands are set against a painted backdrop and the entrance continues the colosseum aesthetic with more columns and palm trees. The Roman 'gimmick' continues in the costuming and pageantry that narrates the event for the audience. The commentators and announcers are all dressed in Roman togas and make their way to the ring carried on sedans by bodybuilders dressed in Roman centurion uniforms. One unfortunate commentator, Bobby Heenan, arrives backwards on a camel. However, the prevalence of 'gimmick' is not limited to the parody of ancient Rome. The roster, which further expresses wrestling's connection to vaudeville, music hall, variety and early cinema, is rich with 'gimmicks'. To name but a few, we see appear: an evil clown embodying the historic connection between wrestling and circus, as well as slapstick and physical comedy; a wrestler dubbed The Narcissist who performs a bodybuilding routine surrounded by mirrors and scantily clad women; the undead persona The Undertaker battling a character called The Giant Gonzalez in a match that conjures both horror theatre and freakshow performance; and a superheavy weight Hawaiian wrestler portraying a Japanese sumo. Alongside these gimmicks, we also see wrestlers portraying a Spanish matador, a Native American and a tag team consisting of a supposed millionaire and a suspect tax inspector. While in terms of traditional wrestling craft, this show is widely considered to be one of the worst, it is an interesting example of how wrestling borrows greedily and reductively, from a broad gambit of popular culture.

For mainstream companies like WWE, wrestler gimmicks may be one component of a vast and intricate corporate machine, but they have been vital in its unmatched financial success. Eero Laine for example has detailed how wrestler gimmicks in WWE, what it calls 'Superstars', are often reduced to merely copyrighted name(s) and physical likeness, subservient to an apparatus of legally binding contracts (2019, p.82). When an independent wrestler is contracted to WWE, they are frequently rebranded both in name and appearance.<sup>76</sup> There is an obvious commercial logic here: WWE trademarks and licencing are critical to its lucrative merchandising and advertising revenue streams. This raises the question of agency. Is character the responsibility of the professional wrestler? Whose job it is to embody a specific 'gimmick', or is it the company's creative team made up of writers and producers that are ultimately responsible? In terms of scholarship on specific WWE 'gimmicks', the company's attitude toward wrestling character has been the subject of several enquiries.

Aaron J. Petten's systematic analysis of WWE television programming, in which he explores how storytelling in wrestling video games reproduce the structural conventions of actual wrestling, provides a useful starting point. In terms of 'gimmicks', Petten sees onscreen characters as an 'interface between composition and spectator' providing both a route into the matches and a means of following the narratives (2010, p.437). He notes also how WWE programming features 'an abundance of characters that are simultaneously engaged in parallel and sometimes intersecting or interweaving plotlines' (2010, p.437). In terms of engaging the audience in the storytelling process, gimmicks offer the audience a choice of who to cheer, support and follow, and conversely who to boo, reject or deride. 'Gimmicks' provide a set of obviously identifiable characteristics attached to the wrestler. In doing so, they become an undeniably important part of the participatory processes central to the storytelling event, with audiences aligning themselves to characters based on factors

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<sup>76</sup> This is a frequent bone of contention within wrestling fandom with independent fan favourites being given at best generic names and at worse tragically hilarious ones. Recent examples include the renaming of UK independent star Pete Dunne as simply 'Butch', and German super heavyweight powerhouse Walter (pronounced 'Valter') being rechristened 'Gunther'.

such as persona, attitude, disposition, beliefs, outlooks, values, interpersonal relations with other characters, but also fashion sense, style and entrance music. In this way Petten notes, wrestling gimmicks become 'hyperbolized agents representative of popular fads or trends common in popular culture at any given period' (2010, p.443). However, that is not all that wrestlers should be defined as.

In a break from the historic emphasis of wrestlers as athletes (which generally remained common practice outside of WWE), O'Brien and Morton note how during this period 'wrestlers are not sports models for youngsters so much as they are live cartoon characters' (Morton & O'Brien, 1985, p.50). This was arguably a big part of WWE's commercial success. So much so, that during the late 1980s and early 1990s, WWE pushed 'gimmick' to the extreme. During this period, babyface 'gimmicks' included a policeman, a pig farmer, a racing car driver, a hairdresser, cowboys and a drill sergeant; and heels included a repossession officer (who looked more like a burglar), a Canadian Mountie, an academic called 'The Genius', an evil dentist and an escaped prisoner. There are many more examples ranging from the offensive to the ridiculous, but ultimately what mattered was the accessibility, visibility and the ease with which these 'gimmicks' translated to WWE's target market (families). As the 1990s reached its end, and core audiences grew older, resistance to this unashamed gimmickry mounted and different approaches became popular. Influential Philadelphia-based promotion ECW were at the forefront of many innovations associated with this period, including pioneering more complex approaches to character and persona, that challenged the simplicity of gimmick. While not new as such, what ECW showed was the potential for blending wrestler character and gimmicks with the identities of the people playing them. Here the identity of the person behind the wrestler becomes more comparable to the performance personas of popular musicians<sup>77</sup> and artists.

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<sup>77</sup> The crossover between wrestling and music has given the acoustic guitar an unusual status in professional wrestling mythology. In WWE alone, there have been several prominent guitar playing gimmicks, such as Elvis Presley-inspired The Honkey Tonk Man, Nashville's Double J Jeff Jarret and more recently Elias. All three are better known not for how they play the guitar, but rather for smashing the musical instrument over the heads of their opponents. WWE even has a YouTube



Figure 40: 'Gimmick' confusion as four different versions of Gene Munny share the same ring.

Around this time, as 'gimmicks' were becoming more mature, an interesting case arose when two of WWE's biggest stars and most successful wrestlers, Scott Hall's 'Razor Ramon' and Kevin Nash's 'Big Daddy Cool Diesel' controversially quit and joined rivals WCW. This left owner and booker Vince McMahon and writer Bruce Pritchard with a hole in their roster and in the company's merchandise lines. Enter Fake-Razor and Fake-Diesel. Recalling this experiment in gimmickry on his 'Podcast, Pritchard reveals the thought-process behind recasting the two gimmicks, 'we created Razor and Diesel. We could put anybody we wanted in there, no different than a movie and a television show' (Rovere, 2021, n.p.). For Pritchard, the gimmicks were somehow detachable from the wrestlers that embodied them. Given the unmitigated failure of the fake versions, his logic was staggeringly misguided. Doubling down, he states 'there was no fake Diesel and fake Razor. There is Razor and Diesel played by different people'. The point Pritchard misses, indicative of a mentality toward wrestling synonymous with WWE, is that wrestlers embody the gimmicks they portray. Razor Ramon was successful not because 'The Bad Guy' gimmick given to him by WWE was a great literary

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playlist titled 'superstar mayhem with musical instruments, though the guitar remains the most iconic *instrument* of destruction (WWE, 2018).

character written for the stage; it was successful because of how Scott Hall incorporated this gimmick into his broader performance persona, how he blended aspects of the gimmick, such as the Cuban-inspired accent and his signature toothpick prop, with his personal charisma and wrestling style. And because of this, and of the time he spent working this persona with the WWE audience, Scott Hall got over, not Razor Ramon. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that the fake versions of both Ramon and Diesel were comprehensively rejected by the audience.

Before moving away from WWE, it is valuable to consider the limitations that I think are implicit if we take only one approach to wrestling character, such as reading all wrestlers as portraying fixed 'gimmicks'. One of WWE's most successful post-90s characters is John Cena. Cena is more complex than earlier gimmicks, borrowing more from the ECW model, but also problematic in that it retains many features of more reductive models as well. Joy T. Taylor uses John Cena to show how this particularly successful and profitable wrestling character can be read as 'co-constructed along the axes of gender, sexuality, class, age and nationality' (2014, p.309). Cena, a white American male, rose to prominence in WWE in the early 2000s with a character based on what Taylor describes as 'popular constructions of hypermasculine blackness' (2014, p.316). Cena's Blackness was signified by stereotypical, and highly reductive, rap-battle style verbal promotional messages and videos. This problematic presentation was reinforced through costume choices, including a padlock worn on a chain around his neck, a personalised basketball vest and cut off denim shorts, and high-top trainers as opposed to traditional wrestling gear. Casting minds back to earlier discussions of Roland Barthes, I would suggest that the body of Cena was rendered symbolic of a white (the WWE creative team's) stereotyping of blackness. As his popularity grew, as Cena 'got over' with the WWE fanbase, particularly younger audiences, his character was gradually adjusted, and his stereotypical Blackness diminished. Taylor notes how in going through this new transformation, Cena became 'emblematic of the US nation-state' and was increasingly bound up in the ideology of patriotism (2014, p.317). This new Cena, shaped to be sponsorship and family friendly, swapped padlock for military dog collar and now saluted the audience every time he made his entrance. Taylor's detailed reading

highlights how a mainstream wrestling company – specifically WWE<sup>78</sup> – uses ‘gendered racial scripts’, and in doing so becomes complicit in a ‘new and flexible racism’ (2014, p314). Outside of her analysis however is the question of who exactly is responsible for the Cena character, leaving us to assume it is the man himself, who’s shoot name is also John Cena. The anonymity of those involved in writing mainstream wrestling stories, make this question difficult to answer. This uncertainty leads to several common misconceptions around the job of the wrestler, their agency in the storytelling process, and what aspects of their wrestling personas and characters they have control over. What is certain, is that examples like John Cena cannot be taken as representative of how all (or even a fraction) of wrestling personas are constructed.

Taking this analysis of gimmick back to the independent context, it is interesting to understand how the mainstream culture and history of WWE can be a rich source material for the more experimental work of independent wrestlers. And, how through parody and satire, ‘gimmick’ can be transformed into something more creative or critically engaged.

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<sup>78</sup> Taylor points out specifically that ‘professional wrestling fans exhibit a diversity that contrasts sharply with the norm of white heterosexual masculinity’ of WWE and throughout is very clear in her focus on WWE programming.



Figure 41: UK independent wrestler TK Cooper as 'Hulk Hogan'.

Independent professional wrestling in the UK has a recently established, but rapidly growing tradition in which individual wrestlers and whole companies use 'gimmick' as a form of meta-parody and distinctive mode of storytelling. Often comedic in tone, these parodies recreate the history of wrestling, and explore what it is to be a long-suffering fan of the form. 'Gimmick' here is also used to bring the wider world of popular culture and sometimes politics into the ring and satirise and parody them. Parody has undoubtedly been ever-present throughout wrestling history, but in the current UK independent context, Welsh-based independent promotion 'Attack! Pro Wrestling' (Attack) is noteworthy for its enduring influence. Attack was first active from 2012 to 2020, but recently returned to the scene in January 2023 under the ownership of independent wrestler Mark Andrews. Operating from an unusual wrestler-collective booking and promotional structure<sup>79</sup>, where wrestlers booked and promoted the shows, Attack gained a reputation domestically and globally as a

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<sup>79</sup> The company was started by now WWE wrestler Pete Dunne and previous wrestler's that booked Attack include the now Japan-based independent wrestler Chris Brookers .

promotion that embraced wrestling as a performance art.<sup>80</sup> Speaking at the announcement of the company's return, Andrews said of the company 'it's almost like its own little community in a way, with in-jokes, and niche storylines built in to the production' (L. Smith, 2023, n.p.). During the company's initial run, they would regularly stage themed shows that were rich in their use of unusual 'gimmicks', including annual Christmas and Halloween shows. These events featured movie parodies (including a wrestling re-creation of the film *Home Alone* (1990), 'Press Start' themed around video game characters and a show where the roster's regular 'gimmicks' were all rearranged, meaning various wrestlers parodied each other.



Figure 42: UK independent wrestler Chuck Mambo as 'The Ultimate Warrior'

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<sup>80</sup> As such, Attack can be understood as part of a broader, trans-national historiography that includes companies such as DDT in Japan, Chikara in the US, as well as being an important creative influence for Wrestling Resurgence.

Attack has had an enduring influence on my own approach to wrestling storytelling, with parody of wrestling and popular culture a reoccurring motif in Wrestling Resurgence. The use of parody in relation to wrestler gimmick is undoubtedly a way of making wrestling entertaining, and as a prevalent, and often creative mode of storytelling, it warrants attention. However, in my estimation it can also offer strategies for wrestlers and wrestling companies to critique wrestling and the wider culture it inhabits. The specific example I have highlighted from Wrestling Resurgence, does both these things. Paul Booth, citing Rose (1993, p.37), notes how ‘as cultural critique, parody intertextually references the pantheon of texts that make up our mediated culture’ (Booth, 2014, p.398). In terms of wrestling storytelling, with a culture and history that is both long and detailed, there is near-limitless scope for parody across matches, events and in the presentation of individual characters.



Figure 43: Match artwork, Wrestling Resurgence.

In April 2022, independent wrestlers TK Cooper and Chuck Mambo,<sup>81</sup> who typically perform as a babyface best-friend tag team called ‘Sunshine Machine’ took on the challenge of parodying two of

<sup>81</sup> As neither TK Cooper or Chuck Mambo directly participated in this research, I will use their wrestling names only.

wrestling's most famous but controversial wrestlers – Hulk Hogan (real name Terry Bollea) and The Ultimate Warrior (real name James Hellwig).<sup>82</sup> It is an example that I think demonstrates how this common motif of 'gimmick-based storytelling' can offer something beyond only comedic parody, suggesting possibilities for reimagining famous (and much loved) 'gimmicks' that are an inescapable part of wrestling culture, but have been undoubtedly tainted by the actions of the real people that originally embodied them. The match-story, booked by Wrestling Resurgence, invited TK Cooper and Chuck Mambo to retell Hogan and Warrior's main event match from WWE WrestleMania VI (1990), dubbed 'The Ultimate Challenge', which was originally staged at Toronto's SkyDome in front of a reported attendance of nearly 70,000 people. The idea to recreate this match, was inspired by the film *BeKind Rewind* (2008), a 'buddy-movie' written and directed by Michel Gondry in which actors Jack Black and Mos Def accidentally erase a VHS rental store's entire film collection. As a result, the two are compelled to rerecord the films themselves, what ensues is a kind of DIY homage to and parody of famous Hollywood titles, including *Ghostbusters* (1984). The plot of *BeKind Rewind* provided the premise for this wrestling interpretation of the film, where rather than recreate a lost movie, Cooper and Mambo work together to re-wrestle the Hogan/Warrior bout. Like Gondry's film, rather than a blow-by-blow recreation of the original, the wrestling double-act of Mambo/Cooper adopted the same low-fi aesthetic, with the two wrestlers attired in the kind of 'bad' homemade costumes typical to many of these types of popular culture parody. In this sense, the original film, and the wrestling version, can be said to share an aesthetic common to independent cultural products. This after all did not take place in the SkyDome and was not attended by 70,000 people, it was staged in a small theatre in Leicester and attended by around 150 people, no doubt a loss to the other 69,850 people who missed out.

In bringing back Hogan and Warrior, one long-since retired, the other deceased, Mambo/Cooper reembodied two 'gimmicks' inextricably bound to wrestling culture. David Polizzi writes of wrestlers

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<sup>82</sup> In a move that is extra convoluted in terms of the separation of gimmick and real person, James Hellwig actually legally changed his name to simply 'Warrior' (Petchesky, 2014).

during the period this match took place, with reference to the Hogan and Warrior gimmicks explicitly, that they are 'living manifestations of the hero myth (...) made flesh' and that to the audience 'they display what their followers cannot, the strength, faith and courage to overcome the most incredible of obstacles, to defeat the most awesome of opponents' (Polizzi, 1989, pp. 322–3). Polizzi's hyperbole is appropriate in its reflection of an era of wrestling (and wrestling scholarship in fact) that now appears significantly outdated. For mainstream wrestling of this era, it is a moment where its problematic relationships to gender, race and hyper-masculinity were arguably most acute. It is therefore telling that the personal histories of the men that portrayed these so-called heroes 'made flesh', are indisputably (for many, though not WWE) tainted by their individual legacies outside the kayfabe of the ring, and the work of the gimmicks and the storytelling. Hogan for example, who's in-ring gimmick was described by John Quinn as both the 'Real American Hero' and the 'All-American superhero' was fired by WWE in July 2015 when a racist sex tape was leaked to the press (2011, p.28). While Hogan was no longer an active professional wrestler in the company at the time, as a Hall of Famer, and an integral part of its history, he would frequently appear on screen, at live events, and take part in special occasions, such as hosting the 2005 Hall of Fame induction ceremony. Alongside this he had continuing celebrity within popular culture through shows such as MTV's *Hogan Knows Best*. However, as documented by Wilson Koh, following his outburst, 'popular press reports displayed a Hogan persona which was a racist and paternalistic throwback to the white "hard man" figures of the 1980s'. Koh goes on to note that WWE's firing, distancing, and attempted erasure of Hogan from its history, was part of a new 'strategy of corporate social responsibility' (2021, p.5). A more cynical reading would be that the company simply had to be seen to distance itself from Hogan, or risk harming its lucrative sponsorship agreements. While it may have been the racist sex tape that got Hogan fired, it is but one of several marks against him, including many backstage-stories, and interviews, that portray him as everything from a buffoon-like figure of derision, to extremely deluded and egotistical. Hellwig/Warrior is certainly not to be outdone in this career race to the bottom. And though his indiscretions have not

received as much attention, at least not in a scholarly sense, they are no less troubling. The now late Warrior's own brand of bigotry appears by all accounts as indiscriminate as it is discriminatory, but it is his views on homosexuality that he is best known for. Warrior was a man described by the prominent wrestling journalist David Bixenspan as 'virulently homophobic' (Bixenspan, 2019, n.p.). Post-professional wrestling, after several enterprises that were equally as bizarre as they were unsuccessful<sup>83</sup>, Warrior rebranded as a conservative commentator, addressing a Young Republican event using homophobic language and sharing various anti-LGBTQIA+ beliefs (Rousseau, 2017, n.p.).



Figure 44: TK Cooper (as Hulk Hogan) locks in a headlock on Chuck Mambo (as The Ultimate Warrior).

It is in the repurposing, the reprieve, of the Hogan/Warrior gimmicks that I suggest the Cooper/Mambo Wrestling Resurgence performance potentially moves beyond the narrow, albeit entertaining, boundaries of popular cultural parody. In a sense, why should wrestling fans be forced to abandon fully two characters that are so-firmly entrenched in a genre of storytelling that for many means so much. Further, in the fluid, highly intertextual, interplay between various layers of gimmick, character, person and wrestler, we start to see these cultural tensions writ large across the

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<sup>83</sup> Such as a comic book where he tied Santa Claus up in bondage and a fitness programme with no exercise just motivational shouting.

ring. In the action, which riffs, mocks, satirises and ridicules Hogan and Warrior, can those participating reconcile the fondness they might attach to the original performance, with the need to recognise these figures for what they are? In the *Be Kind Rewind* parody match the audience are confronted variously with the 'real' Cooper and Mambo behind their personas, TK Cooper and Chuck Mambo the professional wrestlers, and on top of this are the Hogan, Warrior gimmicks, as well inescapably, and potentially problematically, Bollea and Hellwig.

### Performance personas

Even if the Cena, Hogan, Warrior, Diesel, Razor, gimmicks were the creation of the WWE's creative team, undoubtedly, the eventual success must also be attributed to the people that embodied these characters. To my mind, 'gimmick' and character are not terms that sufficiently account for everything that is going on when a wrestler appears in the ring or on the screen. The person playing the gimmick is also always present. The person behind the wrestler is there precisely to be their 'real' self, and to enliven the gimmick ways that engage the audience in the story, through the skills they have honed over time. In a sense, the gimmick, (one selected by the wrestler or bestowed upon them), is only a starting point. To move this discussion beyond the confines of gimmick, I would argue that the wrestler needs to be conceptualised as the result of interlocking components. This is what the gimmick-play occurring in independent wrestling highlights, through matches like TK Cooper and Mambo's reimagining of Hogan/Warrior. Further, recalibrating gimmick and character in more complex terms as performance personas, specifically in relation to independent wrestling, unlocks a different kind of consideration of wrestler work, that to be an independent wrestler is to cultivate a creative practice. This is the focus for the remainder of the chapter: performance persona and wrestling practice. To do that, I offer a reconceptualised framework and three distinct examples of wrestler work that support different aspects of it.

This threefold construction opens new possibilities for thinking about the wrestler and their work.

Differentiating between multiple layers of the wrestler – as person, as character and as persona –

extends current knowledge on wrestling. This layered way of thinking is based on work in the field of Performance Studies. Phillip Auslander has developed this model in relation to popular music and notes the many ways of understanding the construction of performance personas, such as how 'personal identity may be seen as something one performs' (2006, p.101). He continues, stating that 'the direct object of the verb to perform need not be something – it can also be someone, an identity rather than a text' (2006, p.101). This leads to the idea that performance does not necessarily need to be 'something' such as a wrestling match, it can be 'someone', the performance of being a wrestler. Here then, 'performance is always a matter of the performers not being themselves but also not *not* being themselves' (Auslander, 2006, p.5). We cannot read TK Cooper as Hulk Hogan or Chuck Mambo as Warrior without understanding them also as both their in-ring personas and their real-life personas, those they perform outside of wrestling. This leads Auslander to take David Graver's concept of 'personage' whereby an actor can be said to have a presence in front of an audience as a 'publicly visible person from the character portrayed' (2006, p.101). From this, comes the idea of the performance persona, made up of character, persona and person. The character is a figure portrayed in a specific text (a wrestling match); persona is the self-presentation of the performer (the wrestler); and person is the individual existing behind the construct. In terms of reception, he holds that 'all three levels of personification contribute to the performance's meaning for the audience' (Auslander, 2006, p.5). In terms of translating the concept of musical persona to wrestling, Auslander 'suspects' that this idea 'could be extended to other cultural contexts', an invitation to consider wrestlers in this case (2006, p.101). Therefore, we experience all wrestling storytelling as 'mediated by our conception of the performer as personage' (2006, p.101). These ideas extend beyond the wrestler, and include the audience, who for Auslander become 'the cocreator of the persona and has an investment in it that extends beyond mere consumption' (2006, p.117). It is not my objective to present this idea of the performance persona as definitive, in other words I do not wish to say previous models are wrong and my model is somehow correct. Rather, it

is about using it as a tool to unlock new ways of thinking about the role of the wrestler in wrestling storytelling and the work of the wrestler as a storytelling art.

To understand the wrestler as the custodian of a performance persona, who's success (creatively, culturally, financially) is bound to that of the persona they portray in the ring and on the screen, leads to further consideration of the relationship between the persona and the professional responsible for them. That the persona is part of a creative practice, a profession, through which the wrestlers' profit from. For independent wrestlers, this is the equivalent of being a freelance artist, responsible for marketing themselves, creating work opportunities and cultivating a following. Collaborating closely with independent professional wrestlers for several years has changed my understanding of the art. The remainder of the chapter will consider the wrestler from this perspective, as artist-athletes who maintain a creative practice.

That this level of detailed analysis of the wrestler as a performer has been overlooked, I believe is a consequence of the historic power imbalance. One that either favours promotions over wrestlers or treats them as somehow inseparable or equivalent. In the independent scene power may be shifting. Leading Japanese wrestler Kota Ibushi has, for example, argued that the future of wrestling could be shaped by wrestlers not companies (Abraham, 2018). The roots of this can be traced to the middle of the last decade, where several independent wrestlers cultivated brands that financially matched the earnings of the highest paid WWE performers – see for example the Californian duo the Young Bucks (Jackson & Jackson, 2020). Even though the Young Bucks at the time were a US-based team working globally, and in the lucrative Japanese market, territories like UK and Germany also experienced a similar boom period leading WWE to create the controversial UK-based developmental brand NXTUK.<sup>84</sup> The increased prominence of the independent wrestler therefore demands greater scholarly attention.

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<sup>84</sup> At the time of writing up this thesis, NXT UK has released most of the talent from the brand, and it is reported that NXTUK will be rebranding in 2023 as NXT Europe. The consequences of this for the wider scene are uncertain, but it is indicative of the fragility and instability that has always plagued wrestling both in the mainstream and in the independents.

The growth of British independent wrestling in recent decades is noted by Benjamin Litherland, who, writing in 2017, describes it as being in a 'position of strength not seen since the 1980s'. As a result of this success, it supports a 'core of between 50–100 regular talents' (2018, p.178). Writing at around the same time, Litherland, joined by Tom Phillips and Claire Warden, also noted how the emergence of new companies and talents that initiated this upswell in popularity 'demonstrates that other versions of professional wrestling are possible' (2020, p.119). Stemming from the increased popularity, prominence and profitability of the independent scene, wrestlers increasingly practise what Heather Bandenburg has called new ways of 'doing wrestling' (2020, p.141). This, I argue, has created alternative models for wrestlers to develop individual creative practices that extend the 'work' beyond current models into terrain traditionally reserved for the established professions of artists, musicians, designers and writers. This was the case when Broderick Chow undertook his auto-ethnographic work in 2014. Writing about the London wrestling school where he trained, he noted that wrestling was 'amateur in the sense of it being a labour of love' and that wrestlers 'might be said to engage with the practice for its own sake, making it a form of non-productive labour' (2014, p.85). Despite a global boom, which at the time of writing has arguably come to an end, particularly in the UK, only a few wrestlers earn a full-time living from wrestling alone. Those that do, often find they succeed due to their ability to extend their wrestling work beyond just working events, building it into a broader creative practice.

Through this opening up of traditional wrestling work, new questions arise, such as how do wrestlers earn a living? What skills do they require to be successful? What inspires them? And, is there space in the ring for the values they hold onto outside of it? The Oxford English Dictionary offers multiple uses of the term 'practice' which demonstrates its often-ambiguous meaning in creative subjects. In reconciling this ambiguity, supported by my research, and my experience working closely with independent wrestlers, I proffer an embryonic definition in relation to professional wrestling. My definition is that, as an artist-athlete the wrestler exercises a profession; this involves the application of certain skills and principles, i.e., the practice of wrestling, and the art of wrestling storytelling. To

be a wrestler is to undertake repeated performances and acts of storytelling over time, with the goal to acquire, improve, or maintain proficiency. I take practice in this context as referring to the collected creative endeavours of the independent wrestler: style, medium, influences, commerce, method, interest, values, politics and the pleasure of wrestling itself. Practice results in a unique 'body of work', which constitutes the various output created by wrestlers through their wrestling work, alongside a skilled physicality developed through practice. This comprises several layers. First, the physical body trained for performance by attending training schools and classes and working wrestling matches and wrestling events. Then the work, through which the wrestler creates (their body of work) which takes the form of matches, promos, films, merchandise, interviews etc. In addition is the work that support this within the wrestling space, or related creative industries, such as running wrestling events, directing, modelling, monetising content through social media and acting in film and television to name a few examples. Further, for some wrestlers, it is a practice that provides income and subsistence. This may be the primary income, but in many cases, like all 'jobbing'<sup>85</sup> artists, wrestlers work in a variety of different industries. For some, this work eclipses wrestling, and as a result it becomes more a serious hobby than a career.

Kevin Melchionne notes how 'like individual works of art, bodies of work are artistic objects worthy of appreciation' (Melchionne, 2020, p.2). Evie Carney told me at the end of our interview that when they finished wrestling, they wanted to leave behind such a body, comprised not of paintings, but of wrestling matches. She wanted this body of work to be one that 'tells the story of who I am and what I've been through' (Carney, 2021). It is precisely this presence of the personal, so often absent from accounts of wrestling, that shows the inescapable bond between wrestling work and personal experience. For example, Carney tells me 'when I was at my lowest point, in my personal life, you could see it in my wrestling' (Carney, 2021). It is in these entangled notions of work, life and practice

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<sup>85</sup> It is worth taking a moment here to observe another interesting duel meaning. In wrestling jargon, 'jobber' is used to describe a wrestler paid to come in and lose to another, typically higher profile wrestler. They are paid simply to 'do a job'. While this is far less common in independent wrestling, it remains a staple of mainstream products.

that we start to get a sense of what makes the independent wrestler stand out. It is the autonomy to take decisions about their work and their practice, that highlights key differences between the workers of the past or those in mainstream wrestling. Carney finishes this by describing how she has 'gotten to the point where I don't need to start adding (to her body of work) unless I really need to. I just want to wrestle the matches I really want and that I'm really going to put my whole self into' (Carney, 2021). This idea of a wrestling body of work, raises the fascinating notion of self-curation, of purposefully shaping a body of wrestling. Being selective about which bookings and matches are chosen, and how to add to a legacy, and not detract from it.

Returning to Melchionne's definition then, we can say that by examining bodies of wrestling work (of wrestlers, of companies, of bookers) in this way, 'we are better able to engage the aspects of creativity that require a long-term perspective' (Melchionne, 2020, p.2). This idea of a body of artistic work, an oeuvre, is not something typically applied to such a 'low-brow' form as professional wrestling, and is often reserved instead for far loftier pursuits such as painting or classical music. For Melchionne then, the benefits of studying bodies of work are that 'we learn how to appreciate and construe aesthetic value as it unfolds over the long term' (Melchionne, 2020, p.11). To study a body of work then is to seek to develop knowledge of the individual works – performers, performances, stories; to understand the relationships between them as played out across matches, shows and storylines; and to make judgments and claims as to 'long-term commitments to artistic practice' (Melchionne, 2020, p.2).

### Artist athletes

Each next section is an example of a unique artist-athlete and their creative practice. The goal is to recognise that, like other creative disciplines, there is no one model by which a wrestler works. All wrestlers are different, to be a wrestler is not to somehow subscribe to a rigid definition or role, it is instead about carving your own space within the wrestling industry. Each example provides an overview of their work, but also highlights different views and approaches to storytelling.



Figure 45: The elaborate entrance of the Black Swan Cara Noir.

The Black Swan Cara Noir is the performance persona of artist-athlete Tom Dawkins. What makes Dawkins's work as Noir valuable to this chapter is the distinct but overlapping roles of gimmick, persona, person and character. This highlights the power of persona as a creative act that reaches beyond the ring and becomes broadly applicable to a range of artistic practices. Noir is one of the clearest examples of the new contemporary artist-athlete's plying their craft in the experimental spaces of independent professional wrestling and his output contributes to this expansive framing of wrestling-as-creative-practice. His approach recognises that as well as being implicit in phenomena like hypermasculinity, wrestling can also be a medium that purposefully engages with these different ideas, and in doing so, problematises and critiques them, creating wrestling work that is a form of resistance toward prevailing stereotypes.



Figure 46: Cara Noir's intricate eye-makeup and face paint is a key part of his performance aesthetic.

Cara Noir embodies a series of tensions: between conflicting expressions of beauty and violence; the competing appeals of masculinity and artistry; and the exploration of the extreme emotional registers of anger and vulnerability. A key part of how Dawkins goes about this work is through a clearly defined aesthetic. Dawkins tells me 'Cara Noir is one of those characters I try not to explain to people anymore! I just show them my Instagram and go "this is what I do"' (Dawkins, 2021). This highlights the emphasis Dawkins places on the visual appearance of Cara Noir, thankfully, in this instance, he does elaborate further, adding that 'it's all based around this idea of a love of theatre and a love of performing and merging the idea of a love of combat sports and martial arts and performance together' (Dawkins, 2021). This, the first entry point into the Noir persona, is a kind of visual representation of both the intrinsic tension between sport and theatre (central to wrestling as performance), and masculinity and femininity (often central to how it is written about). Comparing his own upbringing in a working-class area of Essex, he tells me how Cara Noir, is 'someone that

wants to perform, but also comes from a working-class background... and has to deal with homophobia, toxic masculinity, and that's not what real boys do, right?' (Dawkins, 2021). Dawkins describes himself as a 'real-life Billy Elliot', who is the lead protagonist in the British film *Billy Elliot* (2000), the story of a boy growing up in a former-mining community that discovers a talent and passion for ballet.

In the ring, Cara Noir is a manifestation of his personal inner conflict, which results from a profound feeling of being pulled in two directions, between the theatre and playing field. This is what drives Dawkins's creative choices: 'what people see from Cara are the wounds of what that (inner conflict) has caused' (Dawkins, 2021). Dawkins tells me that Cara is both a 'fuck you to the toxic masculinity' he grew up with and an exploitation of trauma around the 'cultural rejection of wanting to be able to do martial arts, rugby, theatre and dance' (Dawkins, 2021). That he would eventually find his creative home in a medium reflective of this idea of cultural rejection and disciplinary liminality is an indication of what motivates his creativity.

Evoking references like the ballet *Swan Lake* from which his moniker 'The Black Swan' is taken (he walks to the ring accompanied by Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*) and the musical *Phantom of the Opera*. Noir has a predominantly monochrome appearance with subtle accents of either red or green, such as his eye make-up. Supporting this is a simple in-ring costume of black tights and bare feet, but on the way to the ring he is adorned in a feather cloak that extends around his body to form wings. Initially, upon entering the performance space, he covers his face even further with a mask made of broken glass. He wrestles topless, making use of his pale white skin and chiselled physique to add to the contrast between black and white. What is apparent from my discussion with Dawkins is that he has a clear vision for how he wants Cara Noir to be read by audiences. However, this 'weird juxtaposition between what we expect from masculinity' is not in itself novel (Dawkins, 2021). As such, to understand the types of storytelling he engages in, the interpretation of his persona can be aided by locating it within broader theatrical ancestry. Rather than detract, this invites a reading that

places Dawkins's Cara Noir within an important lineage of wrestling personas and gimmicks. Here then, I argue that Cara Noir is a development of wrestling personas that play on different notions of masculinity. Masculinity in wrestling, as well as being of recurring interest to scholars, is an important part of much wrestling storytelling.



Figure 47: Cara Noir "licks" Spike Trivet

Historically, inversions of masculinity (particularly those created by heel wrestling characters) has commonly been referred to as a 'pretty boy'<sup>86</sup> 'gimmick'. The idea of the pretty boy in wrestling is an appropriation of the popular film and television trope 'sissy-villain'. In presenting pretty boy characters almost exclusively as heels, wrestling frequently profligates the broader trend in popular culture to use gender transgression as a marker of deviance and villainy. Simultaneously, this is used to highlight the supposedly virtuous and heroic traits of babyfaces. In storytelling terms, wrestling is often likened to cartoons, and it is no surprise that this form of entertainment has historically been associated with these same problematic tropes. Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark E. LaPointe's research into what they term the 'villain-as-sissy archetype' highlights several performative trends

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<sup>86</sup> Such tropes are common in wrestling, particularly in the past, for example there is the often interconnected 'posh boy gimmick' typically presented as a wrestler of wealthy or upper class upbringing.

common to both animated and wrestling storytelling (Li-vollmer et al., 2009, p.98). For example, sissy-villains often have colour added to their eyelids, brows, and face to make them appear more feminine; they are given feminine hairstyles; they are dressed in a dandy fashion, that typically includes finer dress than male hero characters, such as flowing gowns or aerostatic clothes (Li-vollmer et al., 2009, p.99); and often physically villains 'signal their deviant femininity' through exaggerated movement and gesture (Li-vollmer et al., 2009, p.98).

The first wrestler to popularise the villain-as-sissy gimmick was Gorgeous George. Mazer notes how working in the 1950s and 1960s George's performances 'displayed what a real man is not' through a 'feminine frippery' (Mazer, 1998, p.94). This was offset by a brutish toughness in the ring, that meant he was always also a match for his opponents. For Mazer the performances of Gorgeous George are responsible for establishing conventions around how masculinity is portrayed in wrestling, especially around what she describes as the 'complex rather than simple' 'pop' he often elicited from the audience, which was 'as much about identification as condemnation' (1998, p.94). Here then is a potentially important nuance to wrestling that complicates the trope when compared to other genres. The surface level of gimmick presented by the wrestler is only ever one layer in the economy of representation, and the 'complex' pop demonstrates that while audience's reaction may be initially based on 'gimmick', this can be subverted by the other facets of the performer. For example, it is not sufficient to understand Gorgeous George (or Cara Noir) as only a manifestation of the traits of the sissy-villain trope. Audiences are interested in who is portraying the 'gimmick', the quality of their 'work', and the character role they have been assigned in the story of the match or the story surrounding it.



Figure 48: Cara Noir violently drives his opponent through a steel chair.

While it is clear to me that Cara Noir is a manifestation of well-established wrestling storytelling tropes like the sissy-villain, all the cited historic examples were also dangerous in-ring fighters. In doing so his work goes beyond the narrow confines of the pretty-boy gimmick. For example, an ever-present feature in his creative practice is the wider theatrical ancestry that wrestling is entangled within. As a child growing up in the predominantly analogue media era of the late 1980s and early 1990s, he tells me how he ‘only had a handful of video tapes and they were all my parents pretty much, so I had Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton, and I just watched them over and over again’ (Dawkins, 2021). Years later, this early engagement with slapstick would become a key reference point for his wrestling work. He tells me that he is especially drawn to clowning, as it represents a departure from the ‘angry, toxic masculinity, “I’m going to fight you because I’m a man”’, and instead allows him to be ‘genuinely vulnerable, be weak, be sensitive, be angry, be emotional’ (Dawkins, 2021). By using the techniques of slapstick, and its violent comedy, Cara Noir can be both vulnerable and aggressive in equal measure.

As elaborate and beautiful as Cara Noir can be in his visual presentation, when it comes to the combat art of wrestling storytelling, he finds a kind of therapy for working out his inner frustrations.

He refers to this as ‘triggers’, telling me how ‘the nice thing about Cara as a whole, is that I can deep dive into them and pull them out and kind of explore the wound as a performer’ (Dawkins, 2021). This represents what he calls a ‘middle layer’ between Cara Noir and Tom Dawkins. As connected as he is to his performance persona, throughout our conversation, Dawkins is clear on the fact that he sees ‘Tom and Cara as different people’ (Dawkins, 2021). This is particularly important to him, as it acts as a form of protection, ‘this kind of separation is key because we are all performers, and I think that separation is progressive, especially in the current climate that we live in’ (Dawkins, 2021). Here he brings up the ever-present danger a lot of wrestlers face, that by embodying a performance persona so closely linked to their real-life selves, they risk the actions the performer makes in a moment of storytelling, becoming attached to them outside the performance space.



Figure 49: Tom Dawkins/Cara Noir preparing backstage before a match at a Wrestling Resurgence live event.

Ultimately, Cara Noir is a work of wrestling storytelling, when donning the face paint and the tights, Dawkins is entering into a storytelling space, ‘I am being over the top, I am being more violent than I would in real life, and exploring this level of aggression, and physical violence and pushing that to the extreme’ (Dawkins, 2021). There is certainly a danger when proposing terms like athlete-artist

and sport-art and discussing a creative practice rich in artistry like Dawkins's, that wrestling is elevated beyond what makes it entertaining in the first place. This is something that Dawkins is keen to acknowledge in discussing his work, that wrestling should never be afraid of being 'bad art' and should try to avoid being 'fetishized'. Here he is clear, 'I don't think wrestling should be highbrow in any way, it never will be, we can refer to it as an art form because it is, but it is a working-class art form' (Dawkins, 2021).

### **'just a girl who really likes wrestling': Evie Carney and Charli Evans**



Figure 50: Charli Evans in the ring ready for a match.

It is rarely the case that a wrestler creates a fully formed performance persona or enters wrestling with an established creative practice. Typically, this is something that is worked on over time, often years. In fact, it is clear from the history of wrestling, that it is those wrestlers who can continuously develop and reinvent (be that in the ring, on the mic, in their presentation) that endure the longest. This was a thread that ran throughout my interview with Evie Carney in which we discussed the development of her wrestling work as Charli Evans. Indicative of the performance persona Charli Evans would later perform in the ring, when I asked about her earliest encounters with wrestling on

TV, it wasn't the over-the-top gimmicks<sup>87</sup> that drew her in. Rather, it was wrestlers that adopted personas based more on who they were in real life. Simply, Carney describes Evans as 'just a girl who really likes wrestling, who can just wrestle, and relies on that to tell a story' (Carney, 2021). It is this deep passion for the trans-national history and culture of the sport (and art) of professional wrestling that drives Carney's work in and around the ring.

Recalling her early years in the ring, Carney told me how she was 'trying to fit this mould of this conventional like; this is what a female wrestler does.' (Carney, 2021) Entering wrestling as a young woman, and looking around at other women wrestlers in the mainstream, what she saw 'was very much diva, blonde, boob jobs, stuff like that' (Carney, 2021). At this early juncture, her response was 'OK, I've got to try and fit this model as much as I can' (Carney, 2021). This mould, however, was not something that she felt either comfortable in, or satisfied by in terms of who she was outside the ring and what attracted her to wrestling in the first place. Rallying against these initial experiences, the Charli Evans that now performs globally embodies Evie Carney's personal style, taste, values and creative interests. Evie's real-life identity is literally stitched on her gear and dyed into her hair, this includes music and fashion, as well as wrestling. This is an indication of Carney's creativity, and while she is certainly a wrestler who privileges the sporting aspects of wrestling, art is still important to her. For example, she noted that growing up both her parents were artists, and that she had 'always had a big artistic influence around' her, particularly through music, with her parents 'playing punk music in different genres' (Carney, 2021). This led Carney to pursue her creativity throughout her education, 'I did art all through high school and I'm really into film photography and the unknown of it being something that may or may not work out, but let's see how it goes' (Carney, 2021).

Translating into wrestling, she notes how she tries 'to bring some sort of artistic element into my wrestling' (Carney, 2021) . This process would eventually find its fullest expression in the 'violence

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<sup>87</sup> Evie's actual first memory of wrestling was watching an angle on TV: the first time I ever saw wrestling I was just flicking through the TV and just happened to come by it, and I remember I saw Kane (The Undertakers demonic half-brother) and I saw an angle between Booker T and Kurt Angle where he like stole Booker T's wife and it just horrified me. Like honestly, I hated it. I turned it off immediately. I'd have nightmares about Kane coming to attack me or like setting me on fire and stuff like legitimately like I fucking hated wrestling.

artist' moniker she has now adopted, which as she puts it, 'engulfs what I am about as a wrestler, because I love the artistic side of wrestling' (Carney, 2021).

The turning point for her creative practice came shortly after she moved to Australia from the UK, where she started to train and work with leading UK independent wrestler, booker, and all-round creative, Chris Brooks. Brooks is one of the pioneers of a more experimental approach to the presentation and performance of independent wrestling, being a co-founder of Schadenfreude and Friends, as well as a stint booking Attack: Pro Wrestling. He is especially well regarded when it comes to creating and monetising a personal wrestling brand. Carney told me of one of their first conversations, where he asked her 'who do you like? You remind me of Bull Nakano', who is a legendary Japanese women's wrestler that wore elaborate face paint and costumed herself in futuristic cyber-punk gear<sup>88</sup>. When she confessed that in fact Nakano was her favourite wrestler, Brooks replied that while he could get that from seeing Evie Carney, he couldn't see it in her in ring persona Charli Evans, asking 'why don't you do Nakano's face paint? Why don't you do your hair like her? Or perform her moves? Why don't you draw inspiration from her?' This interaction would appear to be a breakthrough moment for Carney. From that point onward, Charli Evans would become an extension of Evie Carney.

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<sup>88</sup> Outside of Japan Nakano is best known for a short but influential run in WWE/WWF in the mid-1990s. At a time when little to no wrestling was on US TV, Nakano stood out both aesthetically and for her powerful hard-hitting in ring style. She remains one of the most influential and respected women's wrestlers of all time.



Figure 51: The Violence Artist Charli Evans with the Wrestling Resurgence Championship.

It was not until late 2019 that Carney arrived at a point in the development of the Charli Evans persona that she was able to say ‘this is it. I understand what’s going on now. This is who I am. This is what I bring to the table’ (Carney, 2021). Getting to that point was a long process. Key to her artistic development has been her admiration for Japanese wrestling. References to the wrestling of Japan are ever-present when watching Charli Evans work in the ring. Recounting that process of gradual transformation, from the generic mainstream depiction of women in North American wrestling, to the unique persona she portrays today, she tells me how working in the ring, and training in Japan was critical, ‘I just started wrestling and taking a lot of inspiration from her [Nakano’s] style of wrestling and All Japan Women... and mashing it all together’ (Carney, 2021). To understand

Carney's practice, it is necessary to briefly unpack some of what makes Japan influential, specifically in terms of women's wrestling.

All Japan Women's Pro-Wrestling (commonly shortened in Japanese to Zenjo) was the leading company for 'joshi puroresu', which is Japanese for women's professional wrestling. During the 1990s joshi became highly influential across all wrestling (including men's wrestling) due to its extremely stiff working style. Central to the 'joshi' of this period, were names like Bull Nakano, Aja Kong and Manami Toyota, who became major global stars. It was also important in reshaping perceptions of women's wrestling in Japan and globally, with Keiko Aiba noting that 'Zenjo succeeded in promoting the women pro wrestlers as popular icons' (2017, p.85). Further, Aiba adds that 'as women wrestlers came into the spotlight, women's pro wrestling changed its image from an erotic sideshow to a sport entertainment healthy in glamour' (2017, p.85). Though no longer operating, the tradition of the Joshi style remains relevant through the work of promotions like Gaea Japan and now Sendai Girls, led by Meiko Satomura (who Carney worked for and trained under in 2018). When listing professional goals during our interview, returning to Japan to wrestle is number one for Carney, 'always my goal is Japan. I feel like my heart is in Japan. I have always loved that style of wrestling so much and I felt so complete as a wrestler when I was there' (Carney, 2021). While Japan supports many genres of wrestling, including the highly experimental work of promotions like DDT, it is arguably most prized for its traditional storytelling, which is often firmly rooted in the sport of wrestling.

As well as Japan, independent wrestling (as embodying certain values), and as a distinct genre from mainstream wrestling, is also important to Carney. This is attached to the creative license she gets working the independents, which is a non-negotiable and a key reason why she could never see herself working for WWE. Explaining the importance of being an independent wrestler, she tells me, 'I don't think creatively I could justify wrestling for them [WWE], I think of me as a wrestler, 15 to 30 minutes is my prime space to wrestle the way I want to and the way that I love to' (Carney, 2021).

Carney takes great pride in being the author of her wrestling, and this is another reason she could not see herself stepping outside the independents, 'I personally couldn't imagine having someone go "this is your match" because I try to put my heart and myself into my work' (Carney 2021). This carries over into the collaborative aspects of wrestling, where she is known widely as someone with a mind for planning matches. In terms of her approach to match construction, she explains, 'I work my style into their style, and I think it's cool to like flow and to mesh two completely different things together' (Carney, 2021). What is clear from talking to Carney about wrestling, is the creativity she finds in the ring, in creating matches, and performing moves.

The history of wrestling and creating a legacy, is bound up in how Carney hopes her wrestling work will be remembered. A dedicated trainer, she aspires to leave a mark on the careers of others. She tells me that she often imagines future great wrestlers listing her among their trainers in interviews. This kind of generosity, together with the value she places on wrestling tradition, can be read as part of wrestling's highly embodied history, with wrestlers passing the craft onto the next generation. For example, in Japan, when asked by a senior wrestler who trained her, she proudly gave the names of wrestlers Robbie Eagles and Madison Eagles, telling me, 'I was so proud to say those people and he knew who they were' (Carney, 2021). Carney wants to create her own training legacy, stating 'I want people in five or six years when someone asks who trained them, I want them to be proud to say it was me.' (Carney, 2021).

**'Clementine is actually very one dimensional': Rachel Seagroatt and Clementine**

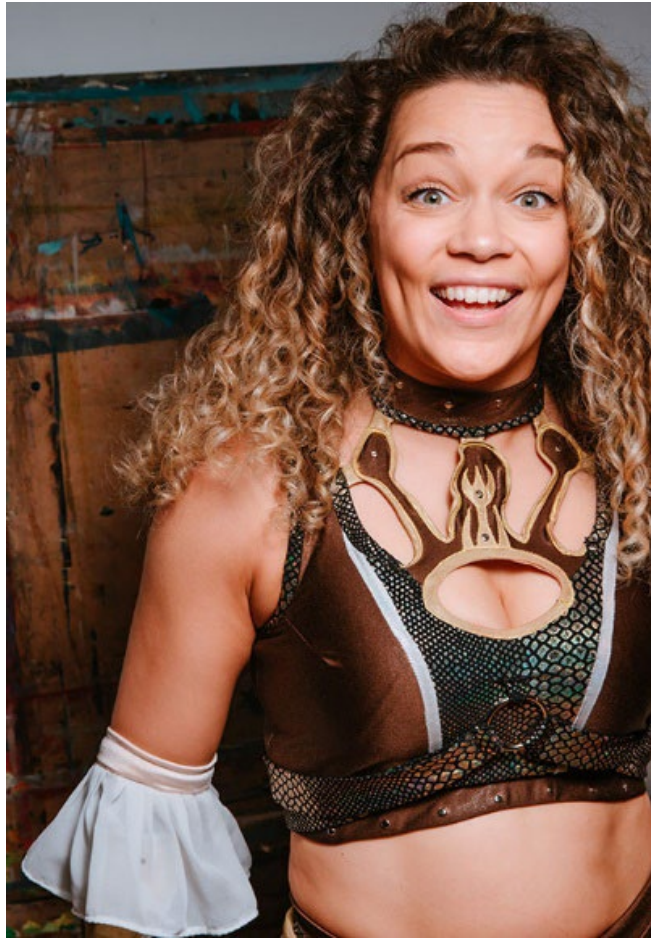


Figure 52: Clementine backstage at Wrestling Resurgence

Until November 2022, Rachel Seagroatt performed as the wrestling in-ring persona Clementine. She is now retired from the independent wrestling scene. Her interview, in ways that only became clear after, reflects the creative struggles that led her to this retirement. Now, she is instead pursuing her creative practice in different ways, chiefly through combat theatre and martial arts. The central theme of the conversation, which partly explains her decision, are the limitations she was experiencing wrestling as Clementine.

As the final artist-athlete, Seagroatt's experience stands somewhat in contrast to the creative practices of Dawkins and Carney. For example, unlike Carney who is driven by her passion for the more combative sporting styles of professional wrestling, Seagroatt is drawn, almost exclusively, to creative storytelling and theatrical performance. Her position became clear when I interviewed her, having just the previous day wrestled for the well-established UK independent promotion Rev Pro.

She told me, 'Rev Pro feels like a big deal, but I have more fun at other places' (Seagroatt, 2022). For Seagroatt, Rev Pro, which is known for high work-rate matches, represents a pressure to perform a certain type of wrestling. This leads to, as she puts it, 'pressure to be good' (Seagroatt, 2022). This experience of pressure is the result of a tension ever-present in Seagroatt's relationship with wrestling. The Rev Pro style for example, appears at odds with what Seagroatt enjoys in wrestling. Key for Seagroatt is that wrestling contains 'a bit of the panto stuff now and again because it feels fun, and you can be a bit silly' (Seagroatt, 2022). The demands of styles that privilege the sporting aspects of wrestling over the theatrical, is a clear theme emerging from Seagroatt's interview data. Interestingly, she attributes this to wider questions around how wrestling balances the sport with the art of wrestling. While this pull between sport and theatre is well established, and a reoccurring theme of scholarship, my interview with Seagroatt adds new layers to the debate. Specifically, her testimony highlights the role of gender. Further, it adds the direct experience of an individual wrestler caught within what has previously only been discussed conceptually.

Seagroatt is clear that as a woman in wrestling her experience of this tension is exacerbated. She explains how, 'there's still a kind of stigma (around women's wrestling) and because of that a lot of female workers think that we need to go in and show we can hang, which means doing lots of moves, doing lots of running spots, lots of hard-hitting strikes' (Seagroatt, 2022). This demand placed on women, who often only have one match on a card, and the pressure to have 'indie classics' for Seagroatt has the effect of limiting what kinds of stories women wrestlers can tell. Seagroatt's testimony serves to further highlight the inherent limitations placed on women wrestlers in a male dominated industry. Here, it is striking that women are still subject to what Mazer called 'the game's masculine protocols' (1998, p.141). This narrowing of how women's wrestling is framed is also at odds with Seagroatt's skill set. Fortunately, during her relatively short in-ring career, she was able to find spaces where she could be creative and tell the kinds of stories that excite her.

Seagroatt is far more comfortable using her creative mind and theatrical skill to tell stories beyond the confines of a sporting contest. She tells me about her 'wrestling books', filled with a variety of different, elaborate characters. For example:

There was one, she was going to be a skunk character and I was going to wear a skunk mask and everything, and my finisher was going to be me doing a handstand and then activate a green mist from my butt, so I could shoot it into the face of my opponent and roll them up. (Seagroatt, 2022).

It is this kind of imagination that drew Seagroatt to wrestling in the first instance. Not a fan of WWE like many aspiring wrestlers, her first experience of the genre was the acclaimed Lucha Underground, a wrestling series produced by the independent film director Robert Rodriguez. Christopher J. Olson and Rogelia Lily Ibarra note how the Lucha Underground series 'integrates elements from various cinematic and televisual traditions, most notably telenovelas and exploration cinema' (Olson & Ibarra, 2015, p.87). Lucha Underground is also noteworthy for its perceived progressive approach to gender roles, with women and men wrestling each other. Inter-gender wrestling is not without controversy, seldom seen in mainstream wrestling, and even only featured in the minority of independent wrestling companies. Notable exceptions in the UK being Schadenfreude and Friends, Riptide, Good and Resurgence.



Figure 53: Clementine in a 'Lion, Witch, and Wardrobe' match for Wrestling Resurgence.

Lucha Underground with 'sci-fi-ish magical realism' had an immediate appeal to Seagroatt. She tells me how in Lucha Underground 'they have snake people, and they have dead people, and they have time travelers, and they all come together in this temple to wrestle' (Seagroatt, 2022). Seagroatt is an avid fan of the storytelling genre magic realism. Maggie Bowers notes that this oxymoronic term, which is difficult to define, 'relies most of all upon the matter of fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happening' (2004, p.3). For Seagroatt, Lucha Underground offered a similar 'little bit of escapism' but remained situated in the everyday, 'it was billed as a real place, a real city, in the US, but they had all these characters who had found this one place where they could congregate' (Seagroatt, 2022). On the wrestling that Seagroatt enjoys, she is clear, preferring 'places where I can be a bit more creative, you know and actually have a character that can do stuff and you know engage in storytelling' (Seagroatt, 2022). Unfortunately, finding places to support this in wrestling outside of her original training school has been a struggle. Exacerbating the issue, for someone so imaginative in coming up with characters, she expresses great dissatisfaction with her

main wrestling performance persona Clementine. Here she explains how 'it's really weird... I'm considered a character wrestler and people say, oh yeah, Clementine's got a great character, but Clementine is very one dimensional' (Seagroatt, 2022). Seagroatt chose the name Clementine just the day before her in-ring debut outside of her wrestling school, it is a name taken from a Walking Dead video game and holds little meaning beyond that. Further, she tells me how Clementine's signature dance entrance was just a way to get rid of her nervous energy before her match, she had not expected it to 'get over' with the audience the way that it would.

When asked to describe Clementine, Seagroatt is sparing, 'Clementine is really just Rachel's anxiety and nervous energy, if you asked me where Clementine grew up, what she's like, it would be very hard for me to answer' (Seagroatt, 2022). Compared to the Tom Dawkins interview, in which he emphasised the need for wrestlers to maintain separation between person and persona, there is a lack of distinction between Clementine and Seagroatt that is a source of frustration. For example, when I ask if she draws on real-life experience in the ring, she describes how 'Clementine is basically a version of hyperactive Rachel, which I know works with other people and is popular with other people' (Seagroatt, 2022). This closeness is not a benefit to her work or her ability to engage in the kind of creative storytelling she values, 'Clementine doesn't feel cool, you know, a lot of people go and pick a character that makes them feel empowered... like a badass' (Seagroatt, 2022).



Figure 54: Clementine 'being loud and taking up space' with BDSM tag team partner Charles Crowley.

Despite this sense of Seagroatt being trapped in a persona she clearly feels unfulfilled by, she is keen to note how there have been moments in her recent work where she has had the opportunity to add layers to this persona and portray Clementine differently. Chiefly, this has come through her tag team run with Richard Summers-Calvert, whose persona is Mr. Charles Crowley. Together they worked as Big Dangerous Scary Mammals (BDSM). Here, she notes that 'BDSM has been fantastic for me because it allowed me to do this kind of intense gimmick, and loudness... and take-up more space and all those sorts of things that I don't feel I can do with Clementine in singles (matches)' (Seagroatt, 2022). It is indicative of the pleasure working as Big Dangerous Scary Animals gave Clementine that it is the final storyline she would work in independent wrestling. Further, her eventual storyline retirement would come because of a match with Summers-Calvert. Her final match had a unique stipulation, if she won, she would retire, if she lost, she would continue to wrestle. To the heartbreak of fans, she won.

## Conclusion

*Rachel Seagroatt is the final wrestler I interviewed. The conversation took place midmorning on a Saturday in early June and as with many of her weekends, she is at a wrestling event. This means that every so often a partially dressed wrestler will walk through the webcam feed. One wrestler even stops to say hello to me. As our discussion winds toward a conclusion, we consider the idea of the professional wrestler's journey. I ask her to reflect on the idea that as independent wrestlers, working across a scene made up of different companies and different audiences each weekend, if it matters that they only see part of a wrestler's journey during the narrow confines of a specific event. In response, Seagroatt, using the example of social media, replies 'I think it's quite cool to be able to see that journey, like Instagram more than anything is great for that because you have a montage, a kaleidoscope of a story of where this person has been, what they have done, and you see their losses and their triumphs' (Seagroatt, 2022). This led me to wonder as to the importance of that ongoing story of the wrestler, that exists outside of the event, and how in the moment of a match and a show, we are only ever witness to a part of that story. Seagroatt, uses the example of a family attending a one off event to extend the idea, 'I think that even if a family only sees someone for ten minutes, if you go out there with the mindset that this is where my character wants to go next, the crowd will get that a little bit, and if they see a journey, It's easier to become invested in that person' (Seagroatt, 2022).*

The three 'athlete-artists' I have discussed in this chapter are still on their professional journeys. Carney is back in Australia but frequently wrestling in the USA (Warden, 2022, p.158). Seagroatt is retired from independent wrestling but pursuing combat art in different creative spaces. Dawkins is only working limited dates in the UK as his international bookings increase. In a sense, independent wrestlers weave in and out, from match-to-match, through rivalries and feuds, and whatever other plot the booker has concocted. This means that when we attend a show, we might not fully comprehend this wider story, but this does not necessarily matter. Even if we only see a snapshot, a single chapter in a serialised novel, the experience is no less valuable, and can be enhanced if the

wrestler knows where their character is going, and how this specific individual moment fits into that wider journey. Above all, what really matters is that they are committed to sharing this one part of their story with us. Wrestlers, and the bodies they inhabit, are points in the storytelling worlds of wrestling that we all gravitate towards, so to understand wrestling storytelling requires a deep understanding of what a wrestler is, what they do, and how they do it. In the next chapter, attention turns to the act of wrestling itself, and what happens when the work of wrestlers, bookers and fans converge. It's time for the wrestling match. It is time for the main event. It is time for the wrestling match.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: WRESTLING MATCHES**

*I am not a professional wrestler. I have however wrestled one match. This infamous bout took place in a car garage cum wrestling school in urban Nottingham in the months leading up to the second Wrestling Resurgence show, around May 2018. My business colleague Peter Allen<sup>89</sup> and I had reached a decision. If we were going to be serious about paying people to beat each other up, we should probably have a rudimentary understanding of how wrestling matches' work. In short, we needed to take a bump.<sup>90</sup> My wrestling match was against a young man called Jerry. It was not, you may be disappointed to know, a classic. I recall only a few details from that fateful morning. Firstly, that Jerry, while a patient teacher and passionate dramatist, was very sweaty. Secondly, that I took a clothesline from sweaty Jerry, bumped successfully but inadvertently shot back-up rather than correctly selling the impact of his attack like a seasoned pro would. I did however, in a startling moment of improvisation, pull off a crude homage to the great Ric Flair. Pretending to be momentarily 'OK', I walked a few paces across the ring and then suddenly dropped flat on my front, indicating to the audience that the impact of Jerry's move had suddenly and unexpectedly caught up to me. This*

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<sup>89</sup> Peter Allen: Wrestling Resurgence smoke machine operator, fabricator of wrestling tables, and payer of wrestling wages and expenses, which is always a tough job at the best of times.

<sup>90</sup> A breakfall. Meaning to take a wrestling move by landing on one's front (front bump) or back (back bump) and breaking the impact of the fall using arms, legs and flat of back or front. To safely 'take a bump' is a fundamental part of the wrestling of performing wrestling.

*was something I am pleased to report the audience<sup>91</sup> found hilarious. The last thing I remember about this experience is Jerry grabbing me by my nipples.*



Figure 55: Gene Munny sells the effects of a brutal nipple attack! Just like the one inflicted upon me by the dastardly Jerry in our training match.

What I experienced during those five minutes spent play fighting in that freezing cold garage in front of eight people helped me understand why people choose to pursue wrestling. It was fun. It was thrilling. It hurt, but in a kind of satisfying way. It was also incredibly hard, demanding both intellect, and physicality. Remembering even the most rudimentary sequences proved frustrating, the required kinaesthetic awareness was demanding, timing needed to appear natural and never forced, and the dramatisation always needed turning up to ten. This whole thesis is of course about wrestling, and if you have not grasped that by this point, we are in serious trouble. In all seriousness though, this chapter really is about the wrestling. The fighting bit. Which sees wrestlers battling it out in matches. In the pages that follow, I narrow the aperture of inquiry to an almost micro-level, to the part that, in terms of the live event, is the centre of everything. Wrestling on this foundational

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<sup>91</sup> Half a dozen fellow wrestling trainees of various ages and levels of experience.

level, the match, is an embodied form of storytelling, that uses combat as its primary mode of communication. So, to those fighting bodies attention now turns.

Wrestling is performed as matches. It is in the match where the 'work' of bookers and the 'work' of wrestlers converge, the ultimate expression of wrestling as a collaborative storytelling art. Matches are central to all wrestling events. The match itself is a story (the match-story). Matches can either exist in isolation or as part of a wider storyline made up of multiple matches, which are referred to as angles. The match is a container for the act of wrestling. They are composed of established moves, routines, sequences and spots that constitute in-ring storytelling. Some elements are both choreographed in advance, while others are improvised during the performance. In this sense, matches can be thought of as semi-choreographed, much like dance. Matches vary greatly in terms of style, complexity, tone, length, duration and the number of wrestlers participating in them. Typically, each match is between ten and twenty minutes, but some can last up to an hour. Matches are rich in storytelling, with terminology relating to how they are experienced by fans, and how they are planned by wrestlers.

Surprisingly, given their importance, matches are seldom a subject for wrestling scholarship. Kit MacFarlane, whose call for greater engagement with professional wrestling as a multi-authored artform frames this chapter, argues that current scholarship has overlooked matches as 'individual dramatic texts' (2012, p.138). In contrast to comparable artforms, wrestling is missing an established canon for scholarship to draw upon. Without such a group of key texts providing a common foundation for enquiry, MacFarlane argues that 'the work of academic cultural analysis has essentially preceded a body of mainstream literary analyses' (2012, p.138). MacFarlane claims that wrestling scholarship has effectively developed ideas about wrestling in generalist terms without ever explicitly mentioning the individual stories that constitute the history of the genre. The claim of this chapter is that if wrestling is to be taken seriously as a creative practice, then studying match-stories is vital. To arrive at this, the chapter focuses on learning to wrestle, the significance of

wrestling moves as the language through which match-stories are created, and the storytelling elements that are used to structure match-stories. It finishes with a detailed examination of one specific match-story through the specific lens of 'selling', which I argue is one of the most important storytelling techniques used in matches.

In his essay on storytelling Walter Benjamin describes the relationship between the storyteller and their subject as that of a craftsman to their material, such as between a woodworker and the wood they carve from. The storyteller shapes 'the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way' (2019, p.55). Benjamin's evocation of craft in relation to storytelling brings to mind a term identified by George E. Kerrick who noted in his analysis of professional wrestling jargon the word 'carpenter' (1980, p.143). While acknowledging the infrequency of its use, Kerrick explains that 'good workers are also known as carpenters because of their ability as craftsmen' (1980, p.143). The best wrestlers possess the ability to craft a good match from their raw material of experience – the sport of wrestling. I think of the wrestler-carpenter as the craftsman that must always consider the narrative, the relationship between each part of the match, the story being told, and how this is experienced by the audience. Benjamin sees experience as a fundamental quality of storytelling, noting how oral traditions permit a 'slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers' (2019, p.37). In a match, the layers are moves, spots, selling, pops, promos, false finishes and all the other narrative beats that go into the telling of a match-story. Benjamin also suggests that 'the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings' (2019, p.37). As established in Chapter Two, in wrestling the perfect narrative is often the retelling of the tried and the tested: triumph grasped from the jaws of defeat, coming close to victory, yet ultimately failing at the last hurdle with the unique inflictions coming through the retelling. As a form reliant on retelling, of athletic contests of combat, over-and-over-again, there are clear shared qualities between the oral traditions described by Benjamin and the stories told within wrestling. 'Work' in wrestling storytelling is synonymous with labour, that of the wrestler's body going through the act of wrestling, but craft also suggest something beyond this. It adds an

artisanal flavour that evokes something more poetic. The craft of wrestling I would suggest is the storytelling that takes it beyond performance. The storytelling of wrestling, like craftsmanship, takes the complex and makes it appear simple. This quality of working hard to make something appear effortless, captures the very best wrestling storytelling, and the metaphor of craft encapsulates that. This is especially true of the match, where wrestlers utilise long-established structures and formulas to engage and excite through a process of retelling, rather than necessarily wholesale originality.

### Learning to wrestle

Bret Hart, perhaps considered the carpenter par-excellence of match storytelling, employs a similar language of craft when describing his in-ring work. Hart is responsible for some of the most acclaimed matches of all time. His seminal, and bloody, submission match with Stone Cold Steve Austin at WrestleMania thirteen, is described by 'Inside the Ropes' blogger James Holder as 'a tale of brutal wrestling perfection' (Holder, 2022), and is held up by many fans as one of the greatest of all time. As a writer, throughout his autobiography, Hart brings the same clarity when describing moves, sequences, spots and matches, demonstrating the passion and pride of a bona fide artisan. Given his undoubted high regard in terms of match craft, he is a reliable source of authority in terms of understanding wrestling storytelling. I will take time to both unpack his views and structure a broader consideration of the act of wrestling around his testimony. Here Hart describes the experience of first learning to grapple in his family's basement.<sup>92</sup> It is notable, that while his father showed him Shoot submission fighting, it was other wrestlers that taught him professional wrestling. He recalls those early lessons in detail:

I learnt the perfect balance; how to lock-up, which is when wrestlers first make physical contact during a match; how to throw and be thrown; how to make the desired sound when hitting the mat; and how to break my fall using my feet and hands, head tucked. (2007, p.37)

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<sup>92</sup> The Hart Family Dungeon, where Hart's father trained many famous wrestlers, is a feature of wrestling mythology, referred to frequently by WWE in its storytelling during the height of Hart's popularity, but also in relation to others that trained there, including various Hart relatives.

In this description Hart emphasises the athletic fundamentals of wrestling. Would-be wrestlers must learn to correctly engage in physical contact with fellow wrestlers, such as how to correctly propel an opponent across the ring. At the same time, the trainee must learn the codes and conventions that govern these impactful, though highly cooperative acts.

Despite the marginalisation of the individual wrestling match, in terms of understanding what wrestling 'work' is, how a match is 'worked', and as Broderick Chow puts it, 'what wrestling work can do' (Chow, 2014, p.84), training has been an important site of inquiry. Locating this alongside the testimony of Hart provides the foundation for dealing with the poetics of wrestling moves and the artistry of match construction. In seeking to understand the internal mechanics of professional wrestling practice, several scholars have entered the actual space where wrestling training takes place. They have done so as observers (Sharon Mazer for example), but also as active participants. Broderick Chow's autoethnographic account of learning to wrestle bridges the experiences of wrestlers like Hart and the ethnographic scholarship of Sharon Mazer and R. Tyson Smith. Through participation in wrestling training, Chow comes to see it as an 'extraordinary theatre of the body' (2014, p.73). Using his own body as a research tool, he can take 'corporeality and tactile sensations' as core data. In doing so, Chow reveals something fundamental to the form, what he calls wrestling's 'paraconsistent logic' (2014, p.73). This is best illustrated by the paradoxical idea of *cooperative struggle*: in other words, two bodies simultaneously working with and against each other to present a story of fighting to the audience. Story is the key word, as it is through storytelling that wrestling can bridge actuality (the raw experience of fighting) and fictionality (the cooperation that facilitates the fighting). This is a dynamic best illustrated by the 'taking' of a move and the 'selling' of the damage caused by it. The very best sequences of wrestling, and indeed full wrestling matches, often feel like a near constant struggle for control through the exchange of attacks, counters and holds. By engaging in the act of wrestling, Chow found that to effectively and safely wrestle, a hidden 'quality

of touch” is practiced (2014, p.75). This touch is often, counterintuitively, light rather than strong.<sup>93</sup> Inversely then, ‘all the exertion and muscular strain’ is in service of ‘selling’ to the audience, or in the ‘work’ of masking the cooperation needed to perform moves correctly (2014, p.75). In relation to such processes, Mazer describes wrestling as ‘at once translucent and opaque’, which suggests an artistry of revealing and concealing (1998, p.89). That wrestling requires strength, athletic skill, and results in actual physical pain (not just the exaggerated kind) is fairly apparent when watching wrestling. However, the real risks and challenges are often skilfully obscured and masked and can be frequently misunderstood by the uninitiated.

From learning the basics (how to bump and lock up), to the advanced, (how to choreograph sequences of moves), Chow finds in wrestling a ‘tacit physical knowledge’ that ‘emphasises kinaesthetic and perceptive awareness’ (2014, p.75). Elaborating on this, Mazer, though not wrestling herself, makes similar observations based on watching training sessions. Mazer likens wrestlers to dancers and improvisational actors that ‘rely on kinetic memory to internalise and store combinations of moves’ (1998, p.75). As a wrestler hones their craft, their physical vocabulary grows until they become ‘capable of developing lines of action on the spot’ (1998, p.74). Indeed, performers rely on memory to improvise in response to their opponent’s body, cycling through established moves, instinctively feeling what should go next. The most skilled wrestlers can create intricate routines and flowing sequences. These will feature both established conventions, as well as new versions that add an original or personal twist. In doing this, over time, and through repetition, Chow sees the wrestlers body as becoming ‘knowledge made flesh’ (2014, p.76). Fundamental throughout is the ability of the wrestlers to work together. In doing so, they practice a kind of knowledge exchange, meaning that every match becomes a chance to learn and get better at the craft.

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<sup>93</sup> A wrestler once told me that historically wrestlers used weak handshakes with one another to convey that they worked loose not stiff, meaning they were not out to hurt. Touch is a key communicative tool for wrestlers.

This process of learning through doing, and through partnership, requires the wrestlers to practice what Chow describes as ‘the political principle of friendship’ (2014, p.83). The work of wrestling therefore is ultimately predicated on the creation of trust. Hart is equally unequivocal in the key lesson he took from his early training experiences, ‘the most important lesson of all was to protect my opponent, not myself, because he was putting his trust, his life, in my hands’ (2007, p.38). Indeed, not only is care critical to wrestling work, but also collaboration. The practice of care is what Claire Warden calls the ‘peculiar paradox’ of wrestling, ‘it appears to be a fight between combatants but, in actuality, is a more akin to ballroom dancing than boxing’ (2020, p.157). R. Tyson Smith reflects on the same qualities, noting how ‘the dialogue of the story requires a high degree of close physical interaction during which reliance on one another is essential’ (2014, p.124). Smith uses the idea of ‘joint passion’ to explain how wrestlers can express ‘uncertainty, suspicion, anger, and fear’ between each other, while also practicing ‘protection, care, respect, and trust’ (2008, p.174). Wrestling for Smith is a form of ‘emotional teamwork that takes place within the self and with other performers’ (2008, p.174). It is through the principles of cooperation, collaboration, trust and teamwork that the story of a match is told. Wrestling training is not just ‘train, eat, sleep repeat’, storytelling training is also vital. For example, writing of boxing but transferable to wrestling, Sarah Crews and Solomon Lennox note how processes of physical training are ‘supported and upheld by the steady diet of folk tales and narratives that boxers are fed, rehearse, and retell’ (2020, p.1). Such an approach is key to Tom Dawkins’s Playfight wrestling school in London, and he sees ‘stories, analogies, and different communication styles’ as key to the schools teaching methodology (Dawkins, 2021). Ross Jones, for example, hosts a regular seminar at the London Playfight wrestling school specifically about storytelling. Storytelling, however, is not just the story of the fight; it is also how the fight is told. To tell the story, moves become words and sequences sentences. Knowledge of this physical language is key to understanding how wrestling matches tell stories.

## Using moves

Professional wrestlers have access to an encyclopaedic repertoire of attacks, holds, gestures and moves. Moves come from the intersecting histories of combat sport and martial arts, wrestling (both shoot and worked) and slapstick. From these individual units (moves), intricate sequences, spots and then whole matches, are constructed. In terms of wrestling moves, little consideration has been paid to their function within wrestling storytelling, such as how they appeal to audiences. Moves play a vital role in the narrative of a match-story. As well as punctuating dramatic moments, individual moves thrill and excite; for many fans, and wrestlers, this is what makes wrestling entertaining. While storytelling is an appeal of wrestling, there is much to be said for the pleasure of the wrestling event on a purely aesthetic level and moves are an important part of this. Lisa Jones for example describes how moves have a poetic quality, noting that ‘there is an element of beauty and grace to be found in a well-executed sling blade, moonsault, or super-plex’ (2019, p.279). The aesthetic value of moves separates the worked combat of wrestling, where beauty is part of its intended effect, and the shoot combat of sport, where it is secondary to the intention to win (Jones, 2019, pp. 279–280).



Figure 56: Jim Diehard performs a ‘power bomb’ move on RJ Singh.

Moves are seldom theorised or discussed at length in scholarship. To conceptualise this aspect of wrestling, I have found the study of sports aesthetics insightful. Teresa Lacerda for example has considered the performance of strength in sport as an aesthetic category. She differentiates between sports like gymnastics and synchronised swimming which exhibit 'ease and lightness' and sports like weightlifting and wrestling where 'effort and heaviness are stamped on the athlete's faces' (2011, p.445). When executing wrestling moves, the 'intrinsic features' responsible for the aesthetic effect are a blend between both effort and weight with lightness and ease' (2011, p.445). Often wrestlers work to conceal and exaggerate these qualities, for example a wrestler taking a move might jump to make a lift appear effortless while the one delivering the move embellishes the actual effort required to make it look like an act of great strength. Lacerda goes on to describe how different types of strength are expressed in a variety of sports, such as in sprinting where 'eccentric strength is the object of appreciation, diverging from the concentric strength exhibited by the weightlifter' (2011, p.445). In a wrestling move, often multiple types of strength are combined, which is a defining feature of the art. This gives wrestling match-stories an aesthetic, that although comparable to mediums like dance, is unlike any other artform. So important is the move's place in wrestling, it can encapsulate an entire micro-story.

For scholars and wrestlers alike, one of the most fruitful ways to conceptualise the move's role in storytelling is by likening it to language and writing. Phrases such as Mazer's 'lines of action' give rise to the idea of sentences of wrestling (1998, p.74). I come to view writing as a point of convergence between how scholars understand wrestling and how wrestlers themselves see the form. Sentence, grammar, punctuation, are all words I have heard wrestlers employ in describing their in-ring work. Evidence of this goes back to Roland Barthes, who declares:

Wrestling is like a diacritic writing: above the fundamental meaning of his body, the wrestler arranges comments which are episodic but always opportune, and constantly help the

reading of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes, and mimicry, which make the intention utterly obvious (Barthes, 2005, pp. 25–6).

This idea of 'diacritic writing' in which the wrestler arranges 'comments' on their opponent's body, highlights an important way in which moves often function differently in wrestling than in combat sport (2005, pp. 25–6). Through a process of storytelling, in wrestling moves come to symbolise emotions. In a legitimate fight such as boxing, the punch is performed for the purpose of inflicting damage to achieve victory. However, wrestling moves function differently. Punches in wrestling are always performed to move the narrative of the match forward. Moves become loaded with additional meaning, communicated through the act of 'selling'. This meaning is excessive to the purpose of winning, for there is no actual fight to win, only a story to tell. To paraphrase Barthes, what matters is not what the wrestler does but what the audience sees. This is not to suggest a separation between competitive fighting and wrestling; certainly, there are moments in both where a strike is not merely an attempt to win a fight but loaded with additional meaning, such as a slap designed to antagonise and express disrespect. Inherent to wrestling is how it complicates the dynamic of 'worked' fiction and 'shoot' reality. It is not sufficient to state that wrestling is simulated and boxing legitimate. There are, for example, attacks that intentionally mark the body, for example a stiff slap to the chest that leaves visible welts and bursts blood vessels. Barthes observes this phenomenon in the forearm strike, one of wrestling's most enduring moves. He notes how this constitutes an 'embryonic punch' in that it never reaches full actualisation (2005, p.27). The wrestling punch for Barthes achieves 'maximum obviousness', but always remains 'no more than a symbol' (2005, p.27). This notion of diacritic writing, whereby moves are imbued with an excessive meaning through the gesture of selling, can be filtered through Barthes other work. For example, how 'to follow a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next' (1977, p.88). Applied to the wrestling match, we might translate this as the narrative not just being about going from one wrestling move to the next, but about moving through different levels of action within the story.

To communicate a clear and engaging story using wrestling during a match, the wrestlers must have a clear understanding of not just how to perform moves and assemble them together but also how to make each move meaningful. Without prompting, field work participant Tom Dawkins evoked this same connection between wrestling and writing. In describing a common training scenario, he explained how he often asks a trainee to demonstrate 'technical wrestling' (Dawkins, 2021). Working off this cue, the wrestlers will quickly cycle through '100 different things' (Dawkins, 2021). However, while the sequences might often flow seamlessly, to Dawkins' trained eye the rapid exchanges often lack substance. He explained to me how the issue was not in the moves themselves, or even the execution; the problem was a lack of punctuation. The wrestling performed for him, was all words with no grammar. For Dawkins, meaning is generated by the purposeful deployment of words and grammar together in a logical order. To return this to wrestling, to tell a cohesive story, the wrestler must use 'movement, pauses, interact with the audience, hold something up, and create jeopardy, even from just something simple like a wrist lock' (Dawkins, 2021). In Barthesian terms, each move, each sentence, must hang together to form an intelligible whole, clear for all in the audience to see. This idea of adding pauses before and after moves highlights another critical difference between combat sport and combat art – *time*. Barthes, recognises this, noting how while 'a boxing match is a story which is constructed before the eyes of the spectator; in wrestling, on the contrary, it is each moment which is intelligible, not the passage of time' (2005, p.24). In combat sport action follows action as required by the demands of competition, the desire to inflict damage to win, and the timeframe imposed on the fight. 'Shoot' fighting then for Barthes, 'always implies a science of the future', whereas the 'worked' art of wrestling emphasises a continuous construction of individual moments. For Barthes, wrestling matches become a 'sum of spectacles' containing a 'transient image of certain passions' (2005, p.24). Barthes's emphasis on passion and emotion is something that chimes with how the wrestlers in my field work see performance and storytelling.

Evie Carney and Rachel Seagroatt see emotion as fundamental to their wrestling performance.

Carney told me that 'if you're drawing an emotion from someone watching, then that's all it needs

to be, basic principles that bring it all together, just movement and emotion' (Carney, 2021).

Discussing a specific match, Seagroatt told me how together with her opponent they planned the story based on 'moments rather than moves' (Seagroatt, 2022). Seagroatt knew that within the match she wanted her persona Clementine, an underdog babyface character, to have a moment where she invited her imposing heel opponent Max 'the Impaler' to hit her. This act she hoped, would draw out the fighter in Clementine before the audiences' eyes. This is an example of storytelling grounded in wrestling, using moves to tell a story. However, with reference to the same match, Seagroatt also described how the two wrestlers incorporated cinematic tropes: 'we had a moment where it looked like it was too much for Clementine... crawling away, Max stalking like a beast, the kind of horror movie moment where you've fallen over in the forest and you're trying to crawl away, but you know the killer is coming behind you' (Seagroatt, 2022). Bringing this back to the function of punctuation, Seagroatt finishes her account by describing how they 'peppered' the match with these kinds of moments of storytelling. So important were such moments, that it was only when 'we thought we needed a punctuation point' that a wrestling move would be incorporated (Seagroatt, 2022). The move as described here then can serve an array of purposes during a match. It might be a punctuation point, or a moment of storytelling followed by a pinfall that acts as a full stop.



Figure 57: Unlike 'shoot' combat sports such as MMA or Boxing, in wrestling the fighters use time differently. Selling an action, by laying defenceless on the canvas, not only sells the offence, but it also creates time and space for the next move or sequence.

Barthes would no doubt argue that what mattered most was the obviousness of these moments described by Seagroatt. Here again, wrestling differs from 'shoot' sport. For example, Barthes notes that wrestling 'offers excessive gestures, exploited to the limit of their meaning' (2005, p.24). The comparison he creates is between judo and wrestling, but we could substitute judo for various sports. The crucial point is that they convey different experiences of time. In a Shoot sport, when an MMA fighter is struck to the ground and is still conscious, they must quickly assume a defensive position or risk further attack. However, in wrestling, the work commands that when taken to the ground the wrestler must sell immediately i.e., their first thought is not defence from further attack, it is to render obvious the effect of the move they have just received. The most obvious example of this is shown in figure 49, no conscious MMA fighter would lay down in this way, they would assume a defensive position to avoid or mitigate further attack. As Barthes puts it, the selling wrestler, 'fills the eyes of the spectators with the intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness' (2005, p.24). This difference in timing is not just a way to communicate the effect of moves to the audience, it also

enables wrestlers to progress the narrative of the match. 'Selling' time, to coin a phrase, creates space for moves to follow one another and for tension to build.



Figure 58: Wrestler takes her time to display the effects of an attack outside the ring, but also gather herself for the next part of the match.

As well as providing the language from which wrestling match-stories are created, certain moves and styles of move are personal to each performer. Wrestlers have unique 'move-sets', which are curated repertoires of specific moves and spots practiced and learnt through repetition, a kind of playlist of 'greatest hits' that act as calling cards for their work and aid the audience's reading of that wrestler's match-story. Through this personalisation of moves, wrestlers can interweave wrestling actions with persona-driven storytelling. In today's wrestling, where the athletic demands and kinetic complexity have increased significantly, how a wrestler chooses to position themselves in terms of in-ring wrestling style is often a bigger determining factor for 'getting over' with the audience than their 'gimmick'. Aaron J. Petten notes here a crossover between combat video games and professional wrestling that demonstrates the influence of wrestling's moves on storytelling in other narrative genres. He cites the popular video game franchises Street Fighter, Mortal Combat and Tekken, which he argues use well established wrestling conventions such as costuming,

choreographed taunts, and importantly for this discussion, signature and finishing moves and attacks.

Often moves and attacks are as important in generating audience appeal as a gimmick; and when the two coalesce, even more so. For example, the anti-hero Stone Cold Steve Austin dubbed the 'Texas Rattlesnake', arguably the biggest draw in wrestling history, famously<sup>94</sup> uses the 'Stone-Cold Stunner'. Austin's 'Stunner' is initiated by a sharp kick to the midsection and completed with an explosive face-lock jawbreaker that propels the opponent across the canvas. The move is perfectly suited to his 'Rattle Snake' moniker in that the speed with which it is delivered, mirrors the strike of an attacking snake. Further, as the move requires no lifting or carrying element, it can be applied seemingly out of nowhere. This quality was particularly effective in that Austin would often apply the move mid conversation on non-wrestling personas, such as authority figures, law enforcement officers and even celebrities. Austin himself noted how the abdomen kick to initiate the move was an important part of its aesthetic, 'not only was the kick effective as a weapon to neutralize my opponent, but it was also a visual signal to the crowd that the Stunner was next' (*WWE News: Steve Austin Speaks About the Origin of the "Stone Cold Stunner,"* 2012). For Austin this serves an important storytelling function, in that it could both generate anticipation among the audience but also be used as a 'curveball', using the kick to tease the Stunner. This connection between storytelling and moves is one that I will come back to, but for now it is worth highlighting that signature and finishing moves often form the basis for a match story e.g., who can apply their finishing move first or conversely how an opponent can avoid a deadly finishing move. This is something that is especially true of another iconic finishing move, Brett Hart's 'Sharpshooter' submission hold. Hart's move of choice is another hold attuned to characteristics of a specific persona. Hart was known as the 'excellence of execution', a moniker bestowed upon him to reflect both his technical proficiency and the quality with which he was able to perform all holds and

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<sup>94</sup> for a period, when I was at secondary school (Circa 1999/2000), all around the playground, to teachers' despair, kids were performing Stone Cold Stunner's on one another.

moves. Typically,<sup>95</sup> the ‘Sharpshooter’ takes longer to apply and is more complex than Austin’s ‘Stunner’. Hart notes how the move looked great when he first adopted it, but he felt that it was ‘a total work in that it was damn near impossible to put on someone unless he let you, or he was out cold’ (Hart, 2007, p.270). Despite this drawback, a move like the ‘Sharpshooter’, was suited to the technical style of Hart. Further, it provided a template for match narratives in that Hart would build much of his ‘work’ around attacking his opponents’ legs so that when the moment came to apply the finish, his opponent would have no choice but to submit. One final example of alignment between persona and move set is WWE’s Undertaker. The Undertaker is a near seven-foot-tall powerhouse wrestler whose gimmick was an undead zombie-like horror character. Mark Callus who portrayed the persona for decades typically works a far slower pace to Austin and Hart, often against opponents of similar stature. In keeping with the traits of the Undertaker character, Callus utilises a devastating belly-to-belly piledriver called the ‘Tombstone Piledriver’. The move is not just a match in name; aesthetically when applied it somewhat resembles the driving of a tombstone into the ground (his opponent’s body). Once delivered, Callus would place his victims’ hands over their chest as if placed inside a coffin and pin them lengthways as opposed to the typical side on pinning position, thus completing the move’s symbolism. These examples further underscore how storytelling in wrestling ultimately explains the actions of the bodies that wrestle in the ring. In this case, how ‘gimmick’ informs ‘work’ and storytelling.

Mainstream wrestling provides a useful case study, for considering the power of moves. On the independent scene however, with greater creative licence, many wrestlers use moves in different ways. Evie Carney for example, told me how she often draws inspiration from wrestlers she admires. For example, one of her go-to finishing holds is the ‘Fujiwara Armbar’, which was invented by Japanese wrestler Yoshiaki Fujiwara, and is the chosen attack of her best friend and fellow Australian wrestler Jessica Troy. Troy works predominantly in Australia, often separated for long periods of

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<sup>95</sup> Ever the perfectionist, Hart would go throughout his career to develop set-up variations that meant he could rapidly apply the hold in unorthodox and unexpected situations.

time from Carny, who works in Europe, Asia and North America. By using the 'Fujiwara Armbar', not only is she expressing her stylistic position (as a technical wrestler), but she is also expressing her relationship with a close friend. Carny describes this use of moves as 'bringing them into the match with me' (Carney, 2021).



Figure 59: Charli Evans applies the 'Fujiwara Armbar'.

As well as drawing on personal relationships Carny will also often 'pay tribute' to wrestlers of the past. For example, she recently combined both moves and attire to honour legendary Japanese star Mitsuharu Misawa and the wrestling company he created NOAH. In this tribute, she wears Misawa-inspired gear decorated in the great wrestler's signature emerald. Explaining this process, Carny describes how she 'got gear for Misawa because I love NOAH so much and NOAH gives me so much joy because it's the style of wrestling that I love'. As well as an aesthetic tribute, Carny/Evans used Misawa's finish in the match, telling me 'right before I did it, it was like he engulfed my body, and I just brought him into me. I'm not strong enough to do that move naturally, I could barely get it before the match, but then I just did it and you see me like fucking celebrate so hard after and I'm like oh my God, it was like he was there' (Carney, 2021). This performance became the catalyst for further tribute performances, for example, next she paid homage to another Japanese great, the

villainous 'Rat Boy' Yoshinari Ogawa. Here, as well as custom gear, she further explored the possibilities of homage, 'I got Ogawa gear, and I was doing all these like sneaky little Ogawa nuances in my matches' (Carney, 2021). When asked what she felt the appeal of this might be to audiences in terms of storytelling, she told me 'I think it's a really low-key thing that not many people would notice but if you do it's like really cool, and you'll start getting what I'm about' (Carney, 2021). Carney's wrestling highlights how it is often only through acquired knowledge, gained through committed fandom, that the micro details of a wrestling storytelling can be accessed. Carney's work rewards connoisseurship. It is also indicative of the attention Carney pays to wrestling culture and history, and how this is embodied in physical actions and moves. This is especially true of her final example, where she wanted to include a tribute to a much-admired peer. Such was her respect, she felt the need to gain permission before including the move. Telling me, 'I did a Back Fist<sup>96</sup> for (Eddie) Kingston, and I asked his permission to use his move, and he was like "you have my blessing" and it was ok. In that moment (when using the move) Eddie was there with me' (Carney, 2021). The reverence ascribed to moves by Carney, demonstrates their vital role in match storytelling.

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<sup>96</sup> It is interesting to note that Eddie Kingston's own use of the Back Fist move is itself a tribute to legendary Japanese wrestler Aja Kong.

## Creating matches



Figure 60: Charli Evans and Gene Munny shake hands before their match.

Once wrestlers have mastered cooperation, athleticism and the corporeal awareness to safely interact within and around the wrestling ring, attention can turn to practicing and performing matches. Matches like those created by Carney and Dawkins are a key part of the architecture of wrestling storytelling. For Laurence De Garis, 'good promotion can get fans into an arena, but good matches will bring them back' (2005, p.195). William Duffy notes how 'matches are embedded in, and gain their meaning from, an overarching and often contradictory tradition of stories that span decades and continents' (2014, p.133). The match in wrestling is never discrete, always part of a wider mythology. To access these deeper levels of meaning requires a specialist knowledge on the part of audiences, but also demands that performers understand where their matches are located within this. The match is the level where the professional wrestler works. While matches often follow established structures, due to a reliance on improvisation, like sport, every match is a unique work of storytelling. Dawkins told me how a match is like a journey where the protagonist must overcome various obstacles, ending in either triumph or failure. Wrestling's fixed nature means

every match can attempt to simulate great sporting tropes – last gasp victories, overcoming adversity, victory in the face of impossible odds.

The uniqueness of each retelling of the wrestling match story is derived from external and internal variables, which include the storylines, backstory, booking requirements, character journeys and interrelationships, time allocated to the match, who is set to win, and different match stipulations.<sup>97</sup> Other variables include the wrestling style of each competitor; physical characteristics such as size and strength; as well as the character role (heel or face) that they are playing. Factoring all of this in, matches are constructed through a combination of established principles, such as the internal logic of how different moves and spots are performed, and what purpose those elements serve the match-story. Matches are typically simple in presentation (one wrestler versus another in a contest with clearly defined rules) but complex in construction. The rudimentary contest structure allows for repeatability and consistency of presentation but contains the capacity for near endless variation. Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien claim 'there are approximately twelve basic patterns according to which a match can be choreographed' and a further twelve variations on those patterns (1985, p.105). Within this are variations around outcome, such as the babyface winning by pinfall, or the heel winning by cheating using an illegal manoeuvre, for example a low blow behind the referee's back. Morton and O'Brien's second set of variables concern stipulation, e.g., the method for winning the match-story or what prize is at stake. Examples include matches that take place inside a cage, or that can only be won by ascending a ladder and retrieving an object, typically a championship belt. Adding this all together,<sup>98</sup> Morton and O'Brien conclude that there are 'approximately one hundred and forty-four basic variations' a match can take (1985, p.105).

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<sup>97</sup> WWE alone has been responsible for some especially ridiculous match stipulations. These include a Thanksgiving themed, 'gravy bowl' match, the winner being the first to dunk their opponent in a giant gravy bowl; a 'Cry Baby Match' where the winner placed a giant adult diaper/nanny on the loser (as well as a bottle and dummy/comforter); and a 'Kennel from Hell' match in which the ring was surrounded by a cage filled with attack dogs (rather than attack the wrestlers, the dogs just spent the match urinating and defecating on the outside).

<sup>98</sup> In a piece of mathematics wrestler Scott Steiner would be proud of.

Like MacFarlane, De Garis suggests that much of academia has overlooked the match in favour of performance studies derived framings. This has had the effect, he argues, of removing ‘any vestige of sport’ and overlooking ‘wrestling’ (2005, p.193). In his essay ‘The “logic” of Professional Wrestling’ (2005) he attempts to counter this by describing, using his own experience as a wrestler, to write in detail about what he calls ‘the traditional craft of pro wrestling’ (2005, p.195). For De Garis, good matches ‘build dramatic tension and reach a climax’ (2005, p.206). He offers with this a quotation from wrestling legend Jim Snuka that simplifies this formula further, ‘go out, get your heel heat, one big babyface comeback, and go home.’ (2005, p.206). Regardless of how many different permutations exist, what matters to the wrestlers whose testimony I have gathered is *how* the story is told. Ross Jones, for example, contends that successful wrestling matches are not about convincing the audience they are watching an actual fight, instead he says, ‘just give them an entertaining version of a fight’ (Jones, 2022). Singh offered me his own extended overview of a rudimentary wrestling match:

You’ve got your good guy, you’ve got your bad guy, you should just have a little bit from the good guy to explain why he’s the good guy, you should have a little bit from the heel, either getting angry, getting upset, cheating, something like that, and it just establishes those characters... it establishes the character for the audience. You then put your baby face in peril, through the heat, you have your baby face in peril... you have those little hope spots which you know start to get them going again because if you’ve just got a baby face being killed for twenty minutes, no one’s interested in that. You bring back those little hope spots and then you have your big hope, you have your big comeback. And then obviously where you go from that, the finish, is very dependent on your story. (Jones, 2022)

Matches start, as all stories do, with an introduction. During this a common objective is to show the audience what character role each persona is portraying – who is the heel and who is the face. For example, the face might apply a wrist lock forcing a rope break. The babyface being the goodie will

follow the rules to the letter of the law and offer a clean break. This situation could then be repeated in reverse, but when it comes the heel's turn to break the hold, being the villain, he might release the hold and immediately kick the babyface in the abdomen. A simple exchange like this establishes the moral position of each wrestler in the match-story. Roles established, the next two phases of a match typically focus on expanding the qualities of each persona and displaying the differences in the character roles. First 'the shine', which is the part of the match-story for the babyface to shine i.e., show off their physical skill and athletic prowess. The 'shine' leads to the 'heat' whereby the heel, consistent with their role, will cheat to gain an advantage. In matches with a less explicit moral story, the babyface might be forced into making a mistake that the heel capitalises on. This leads into the phase of the matches that is controlled by the heel. In the 'heat', the heel controls the pace of the match, which usually means slowing the action down. 'Heat' is followed by the comeback, which with remarkable consistency is broken up by a 'double down' spot. This acts as a kind of rest point, marking the end of the 'heat', and the start of the babyface's 'comeback' which typically signals that the match will head towards its resolution. In longer matches it is not unusual to have two double downs, one smaller and one larger. A double down can take several different forms, but the most common is where the two wrestlers collide in the ring and collapse onto the canvas. With both down, indicated by the referee, they have until the count of ten to make it to their feet again. Remarkably, they somehow both make it up just in time, and then typically the match enters the 'false finishes' phase whereby each wrestler almost wins the match. During this final passage of action, moves become more impactful and more high risk, as a result the wrestlers exchange regular near falls, each kicking out at the last second. In contrast to the typically slower pace of the first half of the match-story, this 'backend' as it is often called, is frantic in pacing, and if the work has gone well, the audience will be at their loudest and most-engaged. In modern wrestling, near-falls are often used to generate 'pop bubbles', which is where big moves are hit so quickly, that the audience reactions overlap, escalating in intensity with each big move. Concepts like this further demonstrate

the unique methods of storytelling employed by wrestlers during match-stories in relation to the audience.

While this is the classic structure that most match-stories follow, highly skilled professionals, with substantial experience, often subvert the formula in imaginative ways. For example, Dawkins has played around with different opening phases: 'I leave the entire beginning blank and wait for a trigger, in this instance, what I did with both performers, was I waited for an audience member to say something obnoxious' (Dawkins, 2021). In practice, this meant that the matches began with Dawkins and his opponent freely grappling, improvising all their moves and sequences while they wait for the all-important trigger. When the moment came, and someone shouted something obnoxious toward him, he turned to the fan and his opponent promptly kicked him in the head. The key here for Dawkins is that the fan directly brought about the 'heat', and the babyface's downfall, meaning in a sense, that the audience member was partly responsible. Games like this can be risky; when he repeated the routine weeks later, he and his opponent wrestled for almost ten minutes before the trigger finally came, causing his opponent to start panicking that the cue would never come. While this is an extreme example, for Dawkins it highlights the critical role played by the audience in all match-stories, telling me that for matches to be successful in telling a story, 'you need the fan feedback. That's what makes wrestling this kind of interesting live performance, that they are part of it and without them I don't think it holds up' (Dawkins, 2021). By working with the audience in these ways, they are brought into the storytelling process, as co-creators.

In terms of determining what makes a match-story effective, De Garis offers three markers of quality: 'believable, logical, and tells a story' (2005, p.200). While the first two terms that De Garis employs can, and will, be contested as this chapter unfolds, they are still useful indications of views I have found to be broadly held by wrestlers, promoters and fans. The final quality, that the match 'tells a story', is a value shared among everyone I have spoken to over the course of my research. A

match then almost<sup>99</sup> always has at least two storytellers working together. The most successful matches are built on strong creative partnerships and effective teamwork. For Bret Hart, a particularly rewarding collaborator was British light-heavyweight Dynamite Kid. He describes how in their matches they 'were always adding new moves spliced with long, flowing high spots' and that they would 'build higher and higher, climaxing with a finish that was always fresh and believable' (2007, p.66). These descriptions reveal a key point about wrestling match stories, the idea of building, in this case it is 'higher and higher', but matches can also ebb and flow, building up then coming down, only to build up again even higher. In terms of the all-important finish to the match, an experienced wrestler explained in an online seminar I attended how once a match reaches its highest point, indicated by the biggest audience reaction, then it is paramount that the finish occurs shortly after, so that the momentum of the audience is not lost. This kind of climactic finish is noted as far back as Barthes's embryonic analysis of wrestling storytelling. His description is worth quoting in full and unpacking alongside Hart's insights made nearly fifty years later:

Some fights, among the most successful kind, are crowned by a final charivari, a sort of unrestrained fantasia where the rules, the laws of the genre, the referee's censuring and the limits of the ring are abolished, swept away by a triumphant disorder which overflows into the hall and carries off pell-mell wrestlers, seconds, referee, and spectators. (Barthes, 2005, p.30)

Barthes 'unrestrained fantasia' captures what is still an effective way to end a match, one commonly reserved for the final match on the card as a way of crowning an entire event. For example, in these types of match-stories, the closing moments will often include outside interference by wrestlers not competing in the match, referee bumps (where the official is accidentally or intentionally incapacitated) and the use of illegal moves or objects. The goal of this is to bring the audience to fever-pitch levels with back-and-forth swivels, twists and turns in the story. Often these matches

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<sup>99</sup> It is worth noting that in independent wrestling there are instances of matches involving inanimate objects such as sex dolls and even 'invisible' wrestlers.

have high stakes, such as a championship, for example, and thus the peak will be a new champion being crowned, or a defending champion retaining their title against all odds.



Figure 61: Cara punches referee Charles Wheeler during a main event match.



Figure 62: Then with the referee out of action, dismantles the ring ropes to use as a weapon.

In terms of understanding the success of his matches with Dynamite, Hart notes how they had a shared capacity to ‘visualise a match way before we ever did it’ (Hart, 2007, p.66). Due to the frequency with which matches take place, especially in the era that Hart worked, collaborations were strengthened through repetition. ‘Working’ Dynamite once again, this time in the UK, Hart recalls a dramatic end sequence to their match. It describes multiple intersecting storytelling techniques, which require unpacking.

We weren’t giving the crowd the usual flips and rolls; we were giving each other an absolute physical thrashing. Dynamite jammed his thumb up his nose and blood poured, smearing the lower half of his face. When I finally went for my side backbreaker, he kicked his legs up and turned a complete circle in the air, landing on his feet in perfect position to piledrive me. I lay on my back and stared up at the ring lights, happy to have had a great match. The thought disappeared when the lights were blocked out by the flying body of Dynamite, who

had launched himself off the top turnbuckle and crashed head-to-head with me. The crowd screamed as I twisted in pretend agony. I never felt a thing. Dynamite hooked my leg for the one... two... three... (Hart, 2007, p.119)

Hart articulates elegantly throughout his writing a kind of deep passion and knowledge of how the micro-narratives of single spots add up to create compelling wrestling stories. What he captures is central to the appeal of wrestling: drama, sequences and spots layered and perfectly constructed.

## Selling

To 'sell' in a professional wrestling match is to express pain that is at once actual, simulated and exaggerated. 'Selling' is connected to wrestling violence, but could it also be a kind of generosity? It elicits sympathy, but what about vulnerability? Perhaps beauty? Bad selling can be painful to watch, attached to what detractors would point to as the worst excesses of the form's theatre, but *great* 'selling' can elevate matches far beyond mere melodrama. Whatever the position taken, selling is a key part of the wrestler's storytelling art, and thus requires close attention.

The final section is constructed around a specific match-story, which took place at a Wrestling Resurgence event in January 2022. In this section, a broader analysis of selling is punctuated by more experiential extracts and reflections from the match, going back and forth between the two modes of writing. In the match example, selling is used in ways that highlight not only its importance to all match-storytelling but also its potential for thinking beyond current understanding. The match-story sees Tom Dawkins's Cara Noir, in the heel character role, challenge Evie Carney's Charli Evans as the face, in a contest for the Wrestling Resurgence Championship. The match-story is the show's main event, as well as the inspiration for the event's title 'Bring Me the Mask of Cara Noir', a status that reflects the importance afforded to the bout by my own 'booking' process. My overwhelming feeling after seeing the match live on the night was how Dawkins and Carney pushed the concept of 'selling' in ways that expressed emotions seldom seen in match-stories. Their use of selling felt distinctly different to the wrestling storytelling I was so familiar with. To study the match for this analysis, I

used the filmed version as found on the Wrestling Resurgence YouTube Channel<sup>100</sup>, breaking down key moments and around these, theorised match storytelling more broadly. However, it should be noted, that I have endeavoured to not discount my initial gut feelings toward the match as experienced live.

### The Cut Off



Figure 63.

The first moment of ‘selling’ that stands out occurs just minutes into the story. Following a frantic hot start where the antagonist Cara Noir attacks Evans from behind driving her out of the ring with a forearm strike to the back of the head, the two battle back and forth on the outside of the ring. This hot start forgoes any of the classic ‘feeling out’ process but is noteworthy for the way it introduces striking as a feature of the narrative. Both hit stiff forearm blows and chops to the upper body, which, while sold, serve to fire each wrestler up rather than only inflict damage. This introduction is cut off by the first moment of significant ‘selling’. On the entrance ramp, Noir has Evans on the floor. He stands on her feet, jumps into the air and stamps down onto her prone body. This is the first full

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<sup>100</sup> For film link, see appendix ii.

'sell' from Evans, she cries out in pain but before she can grab her injured feet, Noir expertly takes control of her hands. Manipulating her arms, Noir turns her body, so now she faces down the ramp, arms out in front. Using his bare feet, he pins one hand to the wooden stage. Evans reacts desperately to her predicament, trying to free her trapped hand with her free one. Noir holds her there at his mercy for precisely two seconds, rendering Evans's predicament and the danger she faces intelligible. When it inevitably comes, the stamp from Noir is not an exaggerated theatrical gesture, it is a short, sharp, snap. Viciousness personified. This spot is indicative of a common challenge wrestlers face when selling traditional wrestling moves. Evans explained this to me in relation to death match wrestling, suggesting that one of the appeals of the violent object-based sub-genre is the relatability of pain inflicted by objects as opposed to the more abstract notion of pain expressed through an orthodox wrestling move. She told me how while only a few people may know what a bodyslam feels like, everyone will have suffered a paper cut, or slammed their finger in a door. She gave me the cringeworthy example of squeezing lemon into the cuts of an opponent to underscore this point, noting how the spot 'got some of the biggest reactions of the night'. Going back to the match with Noir, this spot whereby he attacks her feet and hands services the same purpose as the lemon juice in the death match scenario. Employed early in the match, it establishes a kind of register of pain that the audience can attune themselves to.

That there are commonalities between wrestling and fighting on the screen or stage is obvious, as Jones told me, there are often the same 'narrative beats' in Star Wars fight scenes as in wrestling matches, however there are crucial differences (Jones, 2021). Most importantly, in wrestling the combat is never entirely mimetic. It always contains what Dawkins calls a 'grounding of the real' (Dawkins, 2021). This means that despite being cooperative and consensually performed, the slams, strikes, holds and falls involve at least some real impact and result in some real pain. I experienced this first-hand learning the two fundamental breakfalls that underpin all wrestling action (the back bump and the front bump) – during the training sessions described at the beginning of the chapter. To bump is to land on the canvas square on the back or the front with chin tucked to avoid neck or

head injury. Wrestling contains safety mechanisms like these breakfalls, but risk and pain is only ever mitigated and never removed entirely. A slam to the mat (thin padding sandwiched between canvas and plywood) should create real impact, submission holds extending joints should be uncomfortable, and kicks should be making audible contact. As a result, injuries are expected – bruises, welts, strains – and tears are necessary. Real pain is as much a part of wrestling as the melodramatic selling of the theatricalised variety. For Lucy Nevitt, ‘at the heart of this performance form is the undisputed fact that wrestling hurts’ (2010, p.83). That it hurts, that it is grounded in the real, is what makes professional wrestling appealing to audiences and practitioners. While the term uniqueness is dangerous, and often falsely attached to wrestling, this realism is perhaps the closest to a unique intrinsic quality wrestling offer. The clearest articulation of this is found in the practice of selling. Developing the concept of selling, informed by his own first-hand experiences of wrestling work, Jaime Lewis Hadley argues that effective selling draws on ‘biological responses to pain that wrestlers mimic in order to externalise pain from what is usually an interior, personal event’ (2017, p.155). For example, selling will often direct attention to a specific body part such as the leg, arm or neck. Provided it is performed in such a way that conforms to wrestling’s internal logic, selling of specific parts of the body in correlation with targeted attacks and actions of the opponent, is a critical part of what Hadley has conceptualised as ‘non-debilitating pain’ (2017, p.155).

Selling is a crucial part of how wrestling stories within the match are told. To sell, means to show the audience that the combat really hurts (Kerrick, 1980, p.143). Given that so often wrestling does hurt, in a sense, the sell, is often not pure representation of pain as it is in films, but an accentuation of the actual pain felt by the move. If, as Lucy Nevitt puts it, ‘pain is the authentic core of wrestling’ and pain differentiates wrestling from other forms of staged combat, then selling is the process by which pain is made manifest by wrestlers (2006, p.84). The sell is not only the performance of pain; in practice it is far more complex. As established, seldom are wrestling bodies behaving how they appear to be, and this is particularly applicable to pain as expressed through the discourse around selling.

## The Sell and The Heat

The realism of Noir's attack is reflected in the selling of Evans. It is not melodramatic. There is a guttural scream (echoed by a sizable audience reaction) that instantly gives way to short, sharp breathing, the clutching of the injured fingers, an assessment of damage and the shaking out of the limb to try and restore function. The gap between the initial attack to the hand and Noir's next move is an expertly calculated twelve seconds. It is a pause with a purpose. It lets the audience understand the meaning of the attack by providing Evans space to sell. It offers a chance for them to breathe after a frantic start and it marks the transition from the introductory phase of the match-story into Cara Noir's heat.



Figure 64.

I will not provide a blow-by-blow account of the heat, but suffice to say, throughout, Noir can establish his dominance by grounding Evans using a strategy that alternates between brutal strikes and agonising holds. Within this, brief hope spots show us that while Evans may be down, she is certainly not out. Of preparatory significance to the selling that I will focus on next, is the end of Noir's heat phase. Here, using his foot to kick down onto the prone Evans, Noir appears increasingly arrogant in his actions. He claps ironically along with the audience and toys with Evans by wiping his

feet over her face and slapping her repeatedly. It could be suggested that there is an assumption of dominance to his storytelling in these moments.

Selling is dictated by the internal logic of wrestling as derived from the sport that inspires it and the psychology of its theatricalisation. As with the employment of moves and the construction of chains of wrestling, selling traditionally must make sense in relation to all previous actions performed.

Pushed to the extreme, taken too far, selling becomes implicit in the overly melodramatic; this is typically called overselling.<sup>101</sup> The inverse, underselling, is also equally problematic. Both Jones and Carney express negativity to 'under' and 'mis' selling. For Jones, underselling is symptomatic of a style of wrestling where 'there is so much emphasis on moves, that the moves become the match rather than the moves being the medium which you use to tell the story'. Jones views selling primarily as a mode of communication and a way to give moves meaning. Evans explained to me further how the coding of selling must be reaction-led. She recalls frequently having to correct students as to the differences between a sell and a reaction: 'I keep telling everyone, in my opinion, I don't think you should be just selling, I think you should just be reacting to what's happening'. The example she uses to illustrate this is a missed superkick. A superkick typically should graze the jaw of the wrestler taking the move, but often in the frantic moments of a match the kick will miss the mark and connect with the arm. However, Evans points out that for a lot of less experienced wrestlers they are so conditioned to sell the jaw, that regardless of where the contact lands, they sell that part. Evans advocates selling that is always reactionary: if the kick lands on the arm, then sell the arm.

## **The Comeback**

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<sup>101</sup> In one noteworthy example, during a match at WWE's 2005 SummerSlam PPV extravaganza, wrestling legends Shawn Michaels is squared off for the first and only time. As the story goes, Hogan informed Michaels prior to the match that he was injured, and this would be the only match they would be working, leaving Michaels, who was booked to lose, with no prospect of regaining a victory back, as is typical of a major programme between two top stars. As a result, Michaels, known legitimately as one of wrestling's greatest sellers, chose in this instance to oversell to the extreme all Hogan's moves. The resulting bout is both hilarious and fascinating. Demonstrating both the capacity of one individual to essentially sabotage a performance, but also how wrestling always runs a fine line between being believable enough and utterly farcical (Puri, 2021, n.p.).



Figure 65.

When Evans's comeback arrives, it is triggered by a seemingly match-ending blow from Noir, but rather than finish Evans, it lights a fire. What follows is a comeback sequence peppered with her signature moves, including a release suplex. Isolating Noir in the corner, we now see the second key moment of selling within the match-story. In a reversal of the derogatory foot stomping and face wiping perpetrated on her in the heat, Evans now returns the gesture back on Noir. Propelling herself off the ropes she performs two devastating strikes to the face of Noir with the edge of her boot, but as she makes to initiate a third, the desperate Noir reacts with his first moment of real vulnerability: he desperately clings to the boot of Evans, his prior dominance evaporated. He looks up to Evans, not pleading, but certainly not with his earlier confidence.



Figure 66.

Evans replies with a devastating chop across his chest and then immediately hits the third and final attack with her boot, but there is no let-up, immediately she rifles off boot after boot in rapid succession, Noir desperately trying to cover his face and protect his head. Following this attack, we enter the middle part of the match. Framed by two double-down spots, this constitutes the back-and-forth exchange of moves, predominantly strikes that in this specific story are notable for the clarity displayed in the selling and the reactions. Here, both wrestlers, the story tells us, are evenly balanced. A second double down marks the end of this middle period and signals the end phase of the bout. This starts with a quick sequence of Noir's signature offence that ends with a near fall, the closest until this point that we have come to a finish. Back and forth they come again, before Evans hits her own flurry of moves ending in her own near fall. The action is fierce, the moves complex and impactful, the selling intense, and the audience is reacting to every note the performers hit.

There is another important concept useful to understanding selling – the term 'take'. Wrestlers, and increasingly fans, understand this word to be to receive a specific move or spot. Often in match planning scenarios backstage, a common question I hear wrestlers ask one another is 'are you happy to take that?', meaning is the wrestler prepared to take both the move, and the implied risk and pain

that result from it. To go back then to the sell, wrestling match stories are built around the accumulation of damage dished out between the two performers: in other words, in the story, who can take the most damage? In explaining this concept, a wrestler during a seminar I attended used the analogy of combat video games, where each fighter typically has a health bar. Once a wrestler has delivered enough attacks to deplete their opponent's health bar to zero, they are ready to deal the final attack, typically their most impactful move, and cover them for the final pin and victory. In simple terms then, matches are told through the back-and-forth exchanges of take and selling on an escalating scale of intensity and a declining scale of health.

When I interviewed Evans, almost a year before the match, she told me how 'through the art of selling, and eye contact, and noise and movement, you can start to like get people genuinely invested in wrestling because they start to feel your own pain'. Selling then, is about making a connection with the audience and bringing them into the storytelling process. A great sell created from a devastating move elicits a reaction from the audience that is an extension of the wrestler's selling. It is when the audience sell with the wrestler that the drama of wrestling storytelling is at its most powerful, 'drawing genuine reaction and emotion from people' (Evans, 2021). R. Tyson Smith, in listing the jointly employed techniques of wrestling work, defines the process of selling as 'when your opponent handles your body, make a convincing facial expression of sheer agony, pain, and distress. At the same time, make loud grunts and groans to further convey the physical duress' (Smith, 2008, p.165). The process of selling described by Smith is always directed to the audience. In that regard Nevitt links the 'three-way engagement of performer/characters, opponent/partner and spectator' expressed in the moment of the sell as a central appeal to audiences (2006, p.218). Further adding, that through these concepts wrestling 'involves them, acknowledges and performs to them' (2006, p.218). Viewed in such terms, clearly selling is one of the most important ways that wrestlers communicate with the audience.

## **The Finish**



Figure 67.

The final moment of selling that I want to highlight occurs at the climax of the match. It is here, which I recall from the evening, where the storytelling capacity of selling was most acute, in that it is not a portrayal of just pain on display, but vulnerability and even beauty. Evans, who it should be noted is significantly shorter, though not less powerful than Noir, holds him in a bear hug position. Watching this back, and freezing the frame, the two appear embraced, with Noir almost infantile in appearance. As Evans attempts to turn this position into a finishing attack, Noir counters and the two come face to face, looking into each other's eyes. Their gaze dissolves into forearm strikes to the face, Evans gains the advantage causing Noir to desperately bite Evans's neck in an act of vampirism. Evans fights him off, pushing him back into the ropes. Noir is again vulnerable; he is now literally and metaphorically 'on the ropes'. He shakes his head, offering an insincere desire for reconciliation, then follows up with a slap that reeks of desperation. This is the opening Evans needs; it's her turn now to pause and let the audience see Noir's gesture for what it is. Focused, she attacks with ferocity, peppering his painted face with palm strikes. Dragging him from the ropes she drops him to the canvas with a devastating DDT, driving his skull into the canvas. Noir is dazed, Evans's attacks concentrate on his injured head. Two especially dangerous looking side suplex follow in quick

succession. Evans drags Noir to his feet by his hair. He drops to his knees. Begging for forgiveness. Noir sells his desperation, this is no longer the monster of the earlier stages of the story, he is stripped of all menace and danger, and all that is left is for Evans to put him out of his misery.

I started this section with the claim that selling might be capable of expressing beauty. There are two ideas in existing literature on selling that are useful for understanding how Dawkins and Carney were able to make me feel during and after this match story. First, Nevitt suggests that pain in wrestling is expressed 'according to precise semiotic codes', which are used to engage the audience as participants in the story (2006, p.84). Second, Hadley calls selling the wrestler's 'gestural pallet' (2017, p.155). It is this specific use of semiotic coding, and the use of a complex gestural pallet, which so moved me during this match. Selling is clearly intrinsic to wrestling, occurring in all matches, sometimes expertly, occasionally poorly. There is also a more dangerous aspect to this, where selling acts as a kind of line between too theatrical (to the point of being embarrassing or awkward) or too realistic, to the point of being uncomfortable. To be successful, wrestlers must navigate both, including just the right gestures, emotions and symbols to create an enjoyable and logical match-story.

## Conclusion

Barnburner. Banger. Classic. Three words commonly used in wrestling and general sports parlance to denote a contest of outstanding quality, drama and intensity. I do not know exactly how many wrestling matches I have watched live, unlike more exacting fans, I do not keep a spreadsheet. I could however, given time, list how many were bangers. In a sense, much of the appeal of attending any wrestling event is the hope of witnessing these elusive bouts, to be there when *that* classic match took place. The central claim of this chapter is for the consideration of matches as unique works of art, but why not leave this to the countless journalistic platforms that cover wrestling? For scholarship, I think the value of studying specific matches in detail is that it reveals a rich storytelling practice. One comprised of different techniques, methods and approaches. By developing greater

understanding of concepts like 'heat', 'shine' and 'selling', wrestling adds to existing knowledge on storytelling, but also offers new insights that can be applied to other genres. For example, what could an examination of 'heat' in detective novels or 'selling' in horror movies add to how we understand those storytelling genres? This is the next step in the evolution of wrestling scholarship: to step outside the ring, and to take wrestling theory and practice, including storytelling, into new contexts and new fields of expertise.

## CONCLUSION



Figure 68: Man Like Dereiss celebrates winning his first Wrestling Resurgence championship.

Professional wrestling is an international storytelling art, embedded in the popular cultures of many countries, most prominently North America, Mexico, Japan and the UK. While these territories are the major producers of wrestling, fandom extends across the globe. Wrestling as a storytelling art emerged in fairgrounds, carnivals and music halls at the end of the nineteenth century, forged in a creative furnace fuelled by physical culture and popular theatre. This became solidified early the following century, through the rise of All-In Wrestling, to become what we now call modern professional wrestling. I argue that to fully appreciate the storytelling of wrestling, it must be read as part of a rich theatrical ancestry and that the stories it tells are part of a wide-reaching mythology

and culture. The focus of my research has been the independent subgenre, but many of my findings and claims extend to all variants of the artform.

I began this journey by asking, what is the role of storytelling in independent professional wrestling?

I have discovered storytelling to be multifaceted, performing different functions depending on the position it occupies within the architecture of the wrestling event. Ultimately, storytelling is what makes the act of wrestling and participating in wrestling meaningful for those that engage in it.

Understanding each distinct role led me to focus on the wrestling concept of 'work'. That I would discover such a fascination for wrestling's own terminology, was unexpected. Rather than being merely insider words, I discovered a storytelling language. These words wield great power for those that use them, but potentially also for people studying storytelling in other disciplines. 'Work' is especially important. It encompasses the graft, the labour, the pain and the physicality of wrestling, but also the poetics, the creativity and the emotion of its storytelling. 'Work' might offer a new lens for understanding other forms of creative and intellectual labour, including the 'work' of academia, the 'work' of the artworld, and the 'work' of politics. Applying 'work' to other contexts is a project beyond the scope of this thesis, but something that could be undertaken in the future.

Another key point for future discussion is around the 'work' I do in wrestling, not in the ring or during the show, but the work that goes on behind the curtain. 'Booking' is a subject that has been especially rewarding. 'Booking' is something I do, that I enjoy, and that I like to think I am skilled in. I argue it is central to understanding all professional wrestling, but particularly its use of storytelling. 'Booking' is how wrestling promotions create and tell stories, who they choose to perform those stories and how the stories unfold. I have created new knowledge about 'booking', which adds significantly to wrestling scholarship. However, there is substantial scope for future research on this topic. To unshackle wrestling from monolithic theories and academic misconceptions, greater attention needs to be paid to specific companies, matches, wrestlers and booking strategies. Throughout this thesis I have spotlighted different examples, but there are countless others that

would make excellent case studies, ones that warrant a greater focus. Diving deeply into this material, could benefit a variety of disciplines and illuminate countless topics. This would be my key recommendation in relation to further work on booking.

Another area for further development is in relation to wrestlers. I have sought to avoid imposing my own model for understanding the role of storytelling in wrestling, but undoubtedly wrestlers are central. Wrestlers are the characters within stories and wrestlers are the tellers of the stories. In this sense, wrestling storytelling revolves around the wrestler. To acknowledge wrestlers as the subject of storytelling is not novel, existing scholarship has paid significant attention to what they portray and what they represent. However, the role of the wrestler as author and creative practitioner, has until now been largely overlooked. In Chapter Three I reframe wrestler work in various ways, moving the conversation away from reductive interpretations of 'gimmick' in favour of a more sophisticated frame, like 'artist-athlete'. To do this I have considered the work and 'work' of three individual practices, each with their own distinct approaches, motivations, skills, and experiences. Further research into the work of wrestlers might take a more systematic approach, surveying the profession, gathering data about income, work habits, health and wellbeing (see for example the ongoing work of Claire Warden in this area)<sup>102</sup> as well as what motivates them as creative practitioners.

Wrestling is both live and mediated, often it is simultaneously both, other times it goes back and forth between the two. My view, that the very best wrestling privileges the live experience over the mediated one (and indeed that in fact this benefits the mediated experience) is not uncontested in the wrestling space. I have debated the point with videographers I have worked with on shows. For example, I've been told how wrestlers will work to the side of the audience where the 'hard' camera (fixed) is located; or that the show compere should directly speak to the camera and not the

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<sup>102</sup> [Wrestling research – Health and wellbeing in professional wrestling \(lboro.ac.uk\)](https://www.lboro.ac.uk/research/health-and-wellbeing-in-professional-wrestling/)

audience. I reject both. My preference is always for the live audience and that the mediated audience see the show as document of a live show rather than a show made for them specifically.

While in terms of my management of live events, I will always favour the audience there on the night, mediated forms of wrestling are woven throughout this thesis and play a vital role in shaping how I understand practice and my research. Take for example the experiences I have recounted in relation to my early childhood experience recounted a several junctures in the thesis. There are live experiences such as play wrestling, participating in a wrestling class, watching wrestling shows.

Alongside this sit mediated experiences such as watching shows on VHS, TV, YouTube. In the case of the make-believe wrestling events that I created using action figures (live), these were fed by the consumption of mediated wrestling shows. This continues to be the case in my practice now, but also in this research, for example the use of photography and video throughout each case studies.

That wrestling events demand not just the presence, but the involvement of a live audience, make it an interesting example of a form that necessitates liveness. Here, in relation to performance studies I have show how wrestling others a rich and ever-expanding history that can continue to illuminate current concerns within the field. There are certainly grounds for this to be developed further, especially in relation to digital culture.

The co-creativity of wrestling storytelling art occurs in wrestling live events, played out in and around the ring. Match-stories in my view constitute unique works of art. No two matches are ever the same. However, matches are countless. In a single weekend in the UK, hundreds of matches take place. While much is now recorded, seldom are matches canonised. That is not to say they are not significant, certainly the wrestlers that perform will remember them. Some matches leave a lasting impression. Some matches, for many, move the artform forward. For some, such matches might have the opposite effect. There is scope for wrestling scholarships, but also related disciplines like theatre, to focus more on the artistic construction of individual match-stories. In Chapter Five I have experimented with how specific matches might be subjected to examination as individual artworks.

In doing so, I celebrate wrestling as a creative act, using wrestling's own concept 'selling'. In the future, I think there will be significant value in repeating this process. For example, what would examining multiple matches using the lens of 'heat' reveal about the role of the audience and the work of the 'heel' in wrestling match-storytelling? Such work might not lead to a canon as such, but it would start to recognise the sophisticated processes that underpin wrestling as a storytelling art. It might also contribute new ways of thinking about other storytelling genres, including film, television and theatre.

For much of the past five years, three and a half of which have been spent on this PhD, I have viewed the world through a wrestling lens. In coming to write a conclusion to this thesis, in addition to suggesting areas for further research, I am minded of wrestling terms, such as 'heat' and 'shine', which I think capture my conflicting feelings toward wrestling. 'Heat' describes the process by which the 'heel' intentionally draws the anger of the audience. 'Shine' is the opposite, it is how the 'babyface' is sold to the audience, how we know to cheer them. 'Heat' and 'shine' in a sense frame not only my wrestling life, but also the challenges of academic life. Coming back to the interview I conducted with now former wrestler Rachel Seagroatt, she suggested that wrestling is in a state of internal conflict, telling me 'I feel like wrestling doesn't really know quite where it needs to be now because people say, do we need to be more legit, make people remember that it hurts again? Or do we accept that it is a show and just go larger than life again?' (Seagroatt, 2022). Ultimately, Seagroatt sees this debate as somewhat mute, telling me 'It's just a matter of what you enjoy' (Seagroatt, 2022).

As I write the final sentences of this thesis, I am one day removed from a Wrestling Resurgence show. It was stressful. It was also successful. I simultaneously feel 'heat' toward wrestling, but I also 'shine' with pride at an event that went well. I therefore concur with Seagroatt's testimony but would also extend it. I see the role of conflict, between sport and theatre, between experimentation and tradition, between heroes and villains, as wrestling storytelling's most enduring quality.

Wrestling creates a space where conflict, disagreement and opposing views are not only ok, but are also accepted as inherent. When wrestling is at its most successful, it can cultivate a safe space for grievances to be aired, disagreements to be settled and differences accepted. In a culture frequently characterised by terms like 'culture wars', perhaps we could learn something from the fundamentally collaborative nature of wrestling. Despite the ferocity of the differences on display, ultimately, everyone must work together to sustain and resolve conflict and keep the storytelling alive for the next generation of wrestlers, promoters and fans.

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## IMAGES

Cover artwork: Alec Hugill

Figure 1: Wrestling Resurgence ring announcer Andrew 'Wes' Westerside welcomes the audience. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 2: Former Wrestling Resurgence Champion Gene Munny makes his signature entrance into the ring. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 3: Kanji and Charli Evans engage in a feeling out process to start a main event contest for Wrestling Resurgence. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 4: Alex Windsor and Rhio brawl outside the event space and into the venue café. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 5: Tag Team's The Rocking Souls and Munnywood Blondes perform a wrestling homage to 1980s North American tag team wrestling. In a sense, matches like this retell stories from wrestling past. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 6: A Wrestling Resurgence live event at Nottingham Contemporary art gallery in March 2020

Figure 7: Cara Noir and Spike Trivet work and sell a submission hold. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 8: Wrestlers Charli Evans, Kanji and the match referee pose for a pre-match photo. This is not typical; it was staged in this instance to highlight that this match would emphasise the sport of wrestling. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 9: Gene Munny working 'blindfolded' in a 'gimmick' match, here 'work' is used for comedic effect. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 10: Charli Evans locks in an arm bar forcing Kanji to tap out. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 11: Chris Brooks evokes the rich history of the chop with this devastating strike to Gene Munny. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 12: Independent wrestler Alexxis Falcon playing legendary British Wrestler Big Daddy at a Wrestling Resurgence event. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 13: The villainous Lykos Gym 'drown' Charles Crowley in a paddling pool filled with plastic balls. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 14: Clementine desperately attempts to 'resuscitate' the seemingly drowned Charles Crowley. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 15: Object-based violence is a common motif in independent professional wrestling. For example, in Wrestling Resurgence's signature Artcore Match. Here Drag King Wrestler Big Dick Confidence is struck over the head with a painting canvas. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 16: 'Theatre of Wrestling' film artwork. Artwork by Alec Hugill.

Figure 17: Bob attempts to cut the Magnificent Gisele in two! Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 18: wrestlers Gisele Shaw and Gene Munny practice a magic trick backstage with a professional magician. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 19: Wrestler Jayde, performing as former-UK Prime minister Boris Johnson, applies a headlock to Alexis Falcon playing Big Daddy. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 20: 'Theatre of Wrestling' film artwork. Artwork by Alec Hugill.

Figure 21: a sleazy-looking music hall promoter introduces his prize fighter Munny Martinez and issues an 'open' challenge to an unseen audience. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 22: Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 23: Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 24: Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 25: 'Theatre of Wrestling' film artwork. Artwork by Alec Hugill.

Figure 26: The 'World's Strongest Man' played by contemporary wrestler Charles Crowley emulates early physical culturists like Eugen Sandow. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 35. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 28: non-binary wrestler Visage performing a 'drag' version of fellow wrestler Gene Munny. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 29: Evie Carney who wrestles as Charli Evans. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 30: Tom Dawkins who wrestles as Cara Noir. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 31: Rachel Seagroatt who wrestled as Clementine. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 32: Ross Jones who wrestles as RJ Singh. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 33: Myself in my capacity as Booker, backstage at the Y Theatre with a professional wrestler working on a Wrestling Resurgence project. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 34: Wrestler Gene Munny ponders some particularly complex booking instructions backstage at a Wrestling Resurgence event. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 35: The *Everything Pattered* roster celebrate Roy Johnson after the *Everything Pattered* main event. Photography by Oli Sandler, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 36: 'The Revolutionary' Darius Lockhart. Photography by Oli Sandler, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 37: Chakara and Man Like Dereiss battle during their match for *Everything Patterned*.

Photography by Oli Sandler, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 38: Myself, aged 5 in 1992, sporting Sting-inspired purple wrestling tights and a toy championship belt. Personal property.

Figure 39: Wrestling Resurgence guest ring announcer Mad Kurt introduces North American wrestler Warhorse. The Warhorse performance persona is both a heavy metal gimmick and an ode to the wrestling music gimmicks of the past. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 40: 'Gimmick' confusion as four different versions of Gene Munny share the same ring. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 41: UK independent wrestler TK Cooper as 'Hulk Hogan'. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 42: UK independent wrestler Chuck Mambo as 'The Ultimate Warrior'. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 43: Match artwork, Wrestling Resurgence. Artwork by Alec Hugill.

Figure 44: TK Cooper (as Hulk Hogan) locks in a headlock on Chuck Mambo (as The Ultimate Warrior). Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 45: The elaborate entrance of the Black Swan Cara Noir. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 46: Cara Noir's intricate eye-makeup and face paint is a key part of his performance aesthetic. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 47: Cara Noir "licks" Spike Trivet. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 48: Cara Noir violently drives his opponent through a steel chair. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 49: Tom Dawkins/Cara Noir preparing backstage before a match at a Wrestling Resurgence live event. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 50: Charli Evans in the ring ready for a match. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 51: The Violence Artist Charli Evans with the Wrestling Resurgence Championship. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 52: Clementine posing for a promo photo backstage at Wrestling Resurgence. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 53: Clementine in a 'Lion, Witch, and Wardrobe' match for Wrestling Resurgence. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 54: Clementine 'being loud and taking up space' with BDSM tag team partner Charles Crowley. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 55: Gene Munny sells the effects of a brutal nipple attack! Just like the one inflicted upon me by the dastardly Jerry in our training match. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 56: Jim Diehard performs a 'power bomb' move on RJ Singh. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 57: Unlike 'shoot' combat sports such as MMA or Boxing, in wrestling the fighters use time differently. Selling an action, by laying defenceless on the canvas, not only sells the offence, but it also creates time and space for the next move or sequence. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 58: Wrestler takes her time to display the effects of an attack outside the ring, but also gather herself for the next part of the match. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 59: Charli Evans applies the 'Fujiwara Armbar'. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 60: Charli Evans and Gene Munny shake hands before their match. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 61: Cara punches referee Charles Wheeler during a main event match. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 62: Then with the referee out of action, dismantles the ring ropes to use as a weapon. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 63: Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 64: Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 65: Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 66: Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 67: Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

Figure 68: Man Like Dereiss celebrates winning his first Wrestling Resurgence championship. Photography by Rob Brazier, courtesy of Wrestling Resurgence.

## **APPENDIX**

- i. 'Theatre of Wrestling' (2021) - <https://youtu.be/FHZfNdb2v7s>
- ii. 'Cara Noir Vs Charli Evans' (2022) - <https://youtu.be/Dmm4ziQ58Nk>

