

**Unravelling Psychologically: Knitting in Performance Costume and the Themes of *You Got Older* (2015)**

Dr Emily Brayshaw,

*Department of Design, Architecture and Building, University of Technology Sydney, Australia*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8549-0947>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-emily-brayshaw-204a3b129/>

[https://twitter.com/Dr\\_Costume1](https://twitter.com/Dr_Costume1)

[Emily.Brayshaw@uts.edu.au](mailto:Emily.Brayshaw@uts.edu.au).

Dr Emily Brayshaw is an early career researcher and Honorary Research Fellow within the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building at the University of Technology Sydney. Her work explores performance costume and fashion and dress history, and the relationships of actors, costume designers, and audiences to performance costume. Emily teaches at UTS, has published several works on performance costume, fashion and dress history, and works as a costume designer. Her theatre credits include costume designer for the Sydney 2017 Eclipse Productions version of *Time Stands Still* by Donald Margulies, the 2018 March Mad Hare production of *You Got Older* by Clare Barron, and the 2019 March Mad Hare production of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* by Martin McDonagh.

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## Unravelling Psychologically: Knitting in Performance Costume and the Themes of *You Got Older* (2015)

The act of knitting within the practice of performance costume design and making remains largely unexplored within scholarship and yet hand-knitted garments feature regularly as key items of characters' costumes in stage, television and film productions. While providing a pleasing aesthetic dimension to a production's look as well as conveying feelings of comfort and domesticity, seeing a character knit on stage can also point to themes of mental breakdown and a character's attempts to order their world. This article explores not only these thematic concerns within Clare Barron's play *You Got Older* (2015), but how the act of designing and knitting costumes for a text-based theatrical performance can support actors' work to highlight a play's dialogue and writing. It also discusses how hand knitted costumes and props can allow audiences to make sense of the symbolic and material worlds of a play and provides designers with greater insights into how the systems and processes of knitting can help to create and represent these worlds.

Keywords: knitting; costume; Clare Barron; identity; domesticity; design practice; making; scenography

### Introduction

"Using a chunky, teal, 8-ply pure wool and 12mm needles, cast on 120 stitches. Knit 10 rows in garter stitch, then 10 rows in stocking stitch, then alternate with blocks of 10 rows in garter and 10 rows in stocking until the piece is about 150cm. Alternate colours every 10 rows: teal, navy, white, and teal again. There should be at least four stripes of colour in the blanket. Cast off after a garter stitch block. It doesn't matter if the blanket isn't perfect; rather it's supposed to look like it's been knitted in a hurry because there isn't much time between Tiffany's discovery that "Dad" needs cancer treatment and his hospital stay."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is the knitting pattern that I developed for "Dad's" teal blanket for the Sydney 2018 production of *You Got Older* (2015). I knitted the blanket using a coarsely-woven 8-ply yarn on large-gauge needles so that I could complete it quickly. This quick completion allowed

In 2018 I was engaged by the Mad March Hare Theatre Company in Sydney, Australia, to design and make costumes for its production of the American playwright Clare Barron's work, *You Got Older* (2015). *You Got Older* uses references to knitting and the act of knitting on stage to symbolise how grief, pain and loss impact on communities, families, and an individual's sense of identity. The sociocultural meanings of knitting traditionally link it to, "the homely, women's work, the harmless, and warmth and softness" (Turney 2009: 73). In addition, the act of knitting can provide a sense of calmness, happiness and stress relief to those who knit, while other knitters find that it helps them to think through problems and cope with depression (Riley, Corkhill, and Morris 2013). Faiers, however, has identified an, "exploration of tension" in representations of knitting in novels and films, "both literally as in the tension of the particular knitting stitch, and emotionally, when conscious of knitting's potential to unravel" and, subsequently, of a character's potential to unravel mentally (2014: 102, 103). This usage of knitting to express trauma rather than comfort is in line with what Turney considers a postmodern approach to knitting in contemporary culture that can "exploit, manipulate and challenge" audience perceptions around the "iconology and iconography" of knitting as a relaxing, cosy activity (2009: 77). In *You Got Older*, Barron's portrayal of protagonist Mae Hardy's family as a close-knit unit therefore uses Mae's failed attempts to soothe herself by knitting to emphasize how the play's traumatic events cause her break down.

Barbieri writes that performance costumes are a, "tangible and critical nexus of human interaction in the making and in the experiencing of a performance" (2017: 21). This is, in part, because costumes have the power to, "shape identities and form bodies"

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the actors to rehearse with it so that they could incorporate it into the scenes with ease and allowed the blanket to express, among other things, the speed at which Dad's aggressive cancer spreads.

within a performance and allow the audience to look past the surface of the actor's body to, "some imaginary internal substance or being" (Monks 2010: 3). Knitting is an ongoing activity within the Hardy family and their community, and so I realised that hand-knitted costumes and props would be crucial to shaping and forming the identities and bodies of the Hardy family in *You Got Older*. They would also be important to how the actors, and the audience, would experience the performance. I realised, however, that I would quickly need to improve my knitting skills in order to knit blankets, beanies and a sweater for the props and costumes.

As a costume practitioner, I was aware that actors will often discuss technical, material and symbolic aspects of their costumes with designers and makers to them help prepare for a role. This is because practitioners are, as Ingold writes, "wanderers, wayfarers, whose skill lies in their ability to find the grain of the world's becoming and to follow its course while bending it to their evolving purpose" (2010: 92). A costume practitioner's skill lies in their ability to find the material and symbolic qualities of textiles and yarns and shape them to form the bodies and meanings that emerge as a production evolves from reading the script to opening night. I had not, however, knitted much since childhood. I decided, therefore, to approach *You Got Older* as an informal knitting apprenticeship and designed and knitted two blankets, two beanies and a cable-knit sweater so that their visual, material and symbolic qualities would emphasize the play's themes expressed via knitting-related metaphors.

Jungnickle's sociological approach to design through making-based practices considers, "design not only as subject matter, but also method of investigation and mode of knowledge transmission" (2015: 72). Designing and hand-knitting costumes and props for *You Got Older* therefore allowed me to investigate knitting techniques and processes and transmit that knowledge to the

actors to help them develop their characters. Furthermore, while the communicative qualities of the knitted textiles transmitted knowledges about the characters and their world to the audience. This article, therefore, examines performance costume, scenography and textile theories to analyse how Barron signals the protagonist's mental unravelling in *You Got Older* through tensions identified within sociocultural meanings attributed to knitting. It also draws on these theories to reflect on the process of designing and making hand-knitted performance costumes and props and considers how this can help actors to imbue their characters with a sense of authenticity and allow audiences to experience the symbolic and material worlds of a play.

### **Dropping stitches in a close-knit world**

*You Got Older* is set in Barron's home town, the small country town of Wenatchee in north-central Washington State, USA. It opens just after Mae, a lawyer in her early-30s from Minneapolis, arrives at her childhood home there to care for her ill father. The audience quickly learns, however, that Mae has also been retrenched and her apartment, and has been left by her boyfriend, Ian, whom she says was her boss. Upon moving home, Mae seems to regress to teenage behaviour to cope: she tolerates boring chats with Dad about gardening and avoids his discussions about job applications, sneaks out to a bar and, later, smuggles the guy from the bar into her bedroom. Mae tries to find comfort in sexual fantasies about a rough, Canadian Cowboy, a knitting project, and with her siblings when they gather at a Seattle cancer hospital to support Dad during his treatment. Nothing, however, gives Mae solace and she ends up unravelling. Dad is well enough after 12 months for Mae to start a new job in Minneapolis, but just as her life seems back on track Dad's cancer returns and this time it is terminal. The only real release for Mae comes in the play's final scene that takes place after Dad's death, a

bitter-sweet dance party with her siblings at her younger sister Jenny's wedding. The major themes within *You Got Older*, therefore, include an exploration of intimacy with a parent and an analysis of how grief, pain and loss impact an individual's sense of identity. These themes are expressed, in part, via discussions about knitting and the physical act of knitting on stage.

Knitting is, fundamentally, a series of knots in which a long string is looped through intricate patterns to form relationships between the stitches and rows. These ordered, patterned loops grow and work together to form the finished fabric and this, "order [is] materially expressed in the regular pattern of the crafted artefact" (Araujo 2010: 183). In some forms of knitting, for example lace-work, holes are deliberately incorporated into the knitted fabric, but these form part of the pattern of the garment, which ensures its integrity. Dropping a stitch, however, leaves an obvious hole that disrupts patterns in the garment and can cause it to unravel, visually implying binaries of, "chaos and order, destruction and creation" (Faiers 2014: 105). Similarly, every person has a vital role to play in a close-knit world and Barron uses knitting to give a sense of small-town kindness and familiarity in her representation of Wenatchee and the Hardy family in *You Got Older*. However, when a stitch is 'dropped' that is, a person experiences a significant event such as retrenchment, homelessness, or the death of a loved one, the 'hole' that is left in the fabric of their life can be profound and traumatic as it disrupts routines and patterns. The events of Mae's life are, therefore, a figurative series of dropped stitches that cause her chaos and destruction and *You Got Older* portrays her mental unravelling as she attempts to repair the holes in her life.

### **Tiffany knits for Wenatchee: identity, domesticity and repetition**

It is evident from the start of *You Got Older* that Dad, despite being ill himself, is concerned about Mae. He fusses about Mae's prescriptions and getting her the right toothbrush, has made up her sister Hannah's old bedroom for her, and seems to recognise that she is struggling to cope. Dad's concern becomes clearer in Scene 5 where they are standing by the window, watching the rain and discussing his upcoming cancer treatment. Dad, it seems, has told his colleague Tiffany a little about his, and Mae's, situation and so Tiffany has knitted them each a blanket. Dad attempts to downplay Tiffany's kindness by telling Mae, "Tiffany is always knitting everybody blankets. She likes it. Besides, hospitals are cold" (Barron 2015: 32). Dad's comments reveal how Barron constructs Tiffany's identity through the frequency and volume of her knitting, granting her the social role of a "hand worker" (Johnson and Wilson 2005: 118). Furthermore, as Turney suggests, a knitted object can be a, "reaffirmation of the maker's personal identity" (2012: 305). Framing Tiffany's identity as a kindly colleague who knits blankets allows Dad to reassure Mae that she need not feel bad about the gift, because Tiffany enjoys knitting, despite the intensive labour involved.

Tiffany's blankets position her a metonym for stability and domesticity within the play, even though she never appears on stage. For example, in Scene 6 in which the family gather at Dad's hospital bed, Mae's younger sister, Jenny, enquires about provenance of the blankets. Mae replies that they come from Tiffany:

Jenny: Tiffany?

Dad: Tiffany at the office.

Mae: She knits.

Dad: The apricot one is Mae's. And the teal one is mine (Barron 2015: 52).

The exchange tells the audience that Tiffany knows she cannot fight Dad's cancer and

that it is not appropriate for her to be there, but that she is offering the Hardy family physical and psychological comfort. This is because, as Turney notes, the meaning of “knitting for others within the popular cultural psyche, is to see both act and object as indicative of love” (2012: 310). Furthermore, hospitals are not just physically cold, they can be emotionally cold, and cancer treatment is painful and scary. Tiffany’s blankets, therefore, invoke the promise of a kind, cosy, stable, domestic world outside the hospital. This is also because, as Browning notes, the presence of knitted objects alludes to, “not only their use in a domestic space, but also their *production* there” (2006: 470). The blankets’ presence, therefore, let the Hardy family, and the audience, imagine the kindly Tiffany calmly knitting at home, pouring herself and her care for the Hardy family into the blankets.

### **Mae knits for Ian: unravelling, instability and flux**

In contrast to the figure of Tiffany, however, Mae’s identity is in flux. She struggles to feel at home in Wenatchee and her need for stability is compounded by her losses and her worries about Dad. Dad’s concern for Mae continues throughout the play and he suggests in Scene 5 after giving her Tiffany’s blanket she, “should do some knitting again ... [to] “Keep yourself busy. Even in moments of transition. It’s important to keep yourself busy” (Barron 2015: 33). Historically, women have engaged in textile handicrafts to “ease transitions” and “negotiate roles in changing social [and] economic times” and Dad understands this (Johnson and Wilson 2005: 120). He knows that Mae will not stay in Wenatchee permanently, but hopes that taking up knitting while there could give her some of the routines and sense of belonging that she desperately needs. The act of knitting is, by definition, pattern making, which in itself can function as a form of “sense-making” in that it is an activity that allows one to, “watch and listen to [their] own feelings about knitting, as indicators of [their] inner private emotions”



(Derry 2011: 186). In addition, Araujo argues that instead of, “avoiding the discomfort that our internal repetitive mechanisms might provoke, ... pattern rituals promise to open ways for successfully coming to terms with them” (2010: 194). Dad also realises, therefore, that encouraging Mae to knit could help her process her grief at losing her job, relationship and apartment.

Dad’s understanding of the social meanings of knitting and its benefit to the psyche appears to be embedded in the Hardy family Habitus. Mae’s sisters, Hannah and Jenny, also knit and Dad even tells Mae he is, “pretty sure we’ve still got somebody’s yarn down in the basement” that she could use (Barron 2015: 33). Derry writes that leftover yarn represents new patterns and possibilities and new garments can be made from, “bundles of skeins that collectively represent decades of knitting” (2011: 188). Knitting with the Hardy family yarn could, therefore, allow Mae to reinforce her sense of identity and construct new patterns and possibilities while in Wenatchee. Furthermore, director Claudia Barrie made the decision to open Scene 6 with Mae sitting quietly and knitting by Dad’s hospital bed as the siblings arrive, one by one. This literally extended the action of knitting on stage to a transitioning moment for the actors between Scenes 5 and 6, signalling to the audience that Mae is trying to keep herself busy and make sense of her feelings. Mae takes a break from her knitting in Scene 6 to interact with her siblings, but returns to it later in the scene for respite from the family dynamics and intense emotions being played out in the hospital.

Barron’s use of knitting in Scene 6 to symbolise Mae’s ordering and protecting of the self, however, emphasizes Mae’s inability to do precisely this. Faiers’ examples of representation of knitting in mainstream films and in novels, including Holly Golightly’s knitting in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), illustrate how some knitters, “constantly teeter on the edge of collapse, or knit to forget traumatic experiences”

(2014: 103). Mae's knitting project is a sweater for her ex-boyfriend, which immediately prompts her siblings to mock her. Mae's brother Matthew, for example, tells her that knitting a sweater for Ian is "nuts" and "a little psycho" (Barron 2015: 56). This is in part because a knitted object does not always, "solely represent "love", but also [signifies] possessiveness, control, and dominion ... [and] an embrace" Turney (2012: 307-308). Mae's knitting therefore represents a desperate attempt to control her situation by reaching out and touching Ian in the hope of a reconciliation. It also signals that Mae finds indulging in the nostalgia of her failed relationship preferable to coping with the realities of her current traumatic situation.

Despite mocking Mae, however, her siblings' concern is well-meaning and the exchanges provide some comic relief in the emotionally intense scene, especially when Hannah then tells Mae about the "curse": "You knit someone a sweater, they break up with you, unless you've been together five years or longer". "But we've already broken up!!!" Mae replies (Barron 2015: 56). Even Jenny has a story about a friend who was in a "really cute relationship" that broke up after "she knit him a sweater" (Barron 2015: 57). Not everyone, it seems, wants a hand-knitted sweater; homemade gifts, "can be disconcerting to some people. They might think they need to give something back, or that you are giving them a gift for an ulterior purpose" (Derry 2011: 185). This unease may also be compounded by the hallmarks of intimacy within the domestic performance of knitting a sweater, in which the knitter declares, "oneself again and again" (Browning 2006: 471). As knitters, Hannah and Jenny know that knitting can be loaded with symbolisms of manipulation and that, as Turney notes, "To knit such an object is to put oneself on an emotional line ... it is either the elevation of everlasting love or the heartbreaking pain of rejection" (2015: 310). Hannah and Jenny's stories about the

“curse” remind Mae that knitting for Ian might alienate him further and that her mental health might be better served by knitting something else.

Mae’s knitting for Ian, and her siblings’ concern for her, therefore, demonstrate to the audience that Mae is teetering, “on the abyss of catastrophe, of unravelling” and act as what Faiers has noted as, “a counterpoint to impending doom and destruction” (2014: 106). The impending catastrophes are Mae’s mental breakdown at the climax of the play in Scene 8(2), which is represented by her violent sexual fantasy about the Cowboy and Dad’s death when his cancer returns. In addition, Araujo writes, “If the sense of enclosure and privacy propitiated by an engagement with pattern rituals is on one level comforting and reassuring, it may also, on another level, provoke a feeling of suffocation, imprisonment and isolation” (2010: 191). The tension between Mae’s physical comfort and her emotional isolation in Scene 6 was created in Barrie’s production via the powerful image of Mae knitting Ian’s sweater while dressed in a hand-knitted scarf and sitting with her knitted blanket on her lap. Tiffany’s knitted blanket therefore became a physical enclosure around Mae, while the act of knitting showed her figurative attempts to isolate herself from a world in which she is struggling to cope.

Figure 1. The Hardy siblings in Scene 6 of the Sydney 2018 production of *You Got Older*. Left to right: Mae (Harriet Gordon-Anderson), Hannah (Ainsley McGlynn), and Matthew (Alex Beaumann). Costume design, Emily Brayshaw. Photo credit: Clare Hawley.

### **Emily knits for Wenatchee: designing and knitting costumes for *You Got Older***

Barbieri posits, “A visit to most text-based theatre ... will involve an encounter with performers whose costumes are conceived within contemporary ... interpretations of everyday dress. How then does a projected “authenticity” of the character reside in the

clothes the performer wears on stage?” (2017: 194). This idea of projecting the character’s authenticity through costume was at the centre of my decision to knit for *You Got Older*. Successful costume design for text-based theatre must be such a natural fit for the character and the world they inhabit that the audience does not seem to notice it; conversely, any actively-noticed costume must be such a perfect fit with the character’s personality that the audience delights in it. Independent theatre companies, however, generally have tiny budgets, meaning that actors’ everyday dress often forms part of their costumes. Monks notes that costume allows the actor, “to dress up into someone else” (2010: 16). Wearing their own clothes on stage, however, may impact the actor’s transformation into character because the line between their own clothes and performance costume can be unclear. In addition, the actor’s own clothes may not be an appropriate fit with the character they are playing, even in productions that require interpretations of everyday dress. This can, therefore, also impact the audience’s acceptance of the authenticity of a character, despite the actor’s skill.

The actors playing Matthew, Mac and Mae had to wear some of their own clothes as part of their costumes, but the knitted items helped them to dress up into someone else, which helped the audience to accept the characters, their family connections, and Wenatchee, as authentic. This was, in part, because the knitted items were bespoke, material representations of Wenatchee on stage. Twigger Holroyd writes that, “homemade clothes ... provide an ideal way to meet our needs for identity and participation, because they connect the practices of making and wearing” (2017: 129). This is also because people, “create identities for themselves in a contemporary context through their possessions”, which include their clothes (Twigger Holroyd 2017: 52). Matthew’s khaki, cable-knit sweater had a homemade look that shaped the character’s identity and contributed to the character’s authenticity by positioning him as a member

of a family of knitters. Despite his now living away from Wenatchee, the sweater signalled to the audience that Matthew understood and valued the wearing of knitted garments and the communities and people who make them.

A projection of authenticity within the costumes was also achieved by my knitting for *You Got Older* during rehearsals as this transmitted a tacit knowledge of the knitting process to the actors. The *Oxford Dictionary of Superstitions* states that, “knitting on the stage by actresses is taboo”, while knitting on the side of the stage and during rehearsals is unlucky (2003).<sup>2</sup> Neither the cast nor crew were aware of this old superstition, but exposing the actors to knitting and giving them the knitted garments and blankets to work with in rehearsals let them build relationships with the knitted items that were reflected in their performances. This was likely because, “the process and products ... [of knitting] become the outward expression of attitudes, emotions, and aspirations”, as they become integrated into routines (Derry 2011: 182). Working with the knitted objects, in other words, gave the actors tangible, material connections to the knitting idioms and metaphors in *You Got Older* and helped shape their performances. In addition, Harriet Gordon-Anderson, who played Mae, could already knit, which meant that she could project an authenticity of character through the act of knitting itself. To further enhance this sense of authenticity for Gordon-Anderson and the audience alike, I knitted a sweater sleeve for the knitting prop in Scene 6 that she could work on during each rehearsal and performance.

In addition to projecting an authenticity of character, however, the knitted objects in *You Got Older* needed to convey themes of domesticity, grief and the breakdown of identity, while supporting the actors’ expression of these themes. The

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<sup>2</sup> Knitting might have brought misfortune to Mae Hardy, but the production was a resounding success and received excellent reviews.

tactile qualities and colours of the knitted blankets in particular therefore needed to communicate the histories of comfort and domesticity associated with knitting to the audience. Costume designers are generally given a colour palette that complements the scenography, but I chose to adhere to Barron's specifications in the script about the colours of Tiffany's blankets, even though these hues did not fit with the autumnal colour palette of the costumes. Barron deliberately creates a strong visual contrast with the cold, clinical mood of the hospital by specifying that Tiffany's blankets are apricot and teal. These colours, however, are risky in design as their saturation of hue and/or overuse can render an object kitsch, an aesthetic generally considered tacky and nostalgic, and generally undesirable within the context of serious, sophisticated drama. A kitschy aesthetic, however, was exactly what I wanted for the blankets as this would act as a visual counterpoint to the figure of Mae.

As Walter Benjamin determined, kitsch "provokes ... [a] kind of intimacy" and is, "something that is warming ... [an] unadulterated beauty, a simple invitation to wallow in sentiment" (Menninghaus in Benjamin and Rice 2009: 33). These qualities of intimacy and warmth are also shared by knitted objects. Furthermore, kitsch, like a knitted object itself, is produced and grounded in a repetitive manner that, "closes and completes its own system: kitsch wants to see itself participating in a universal happiness, not of high noble accomplishments, but a real universality of modest origins, of common fellowships between all people, of love" (Binkley 2000: 146). Interpreting Tiffany as a metonym for warmth, domesticity and stability and working with Barron's specified colours supported my decision to make the blankets look kitschy. I found balls of 8-ply, peach-coloured yarn at a local flea market that was a similar hue to apricot and knitted a blanket on 5.5mm needles with plain stitch borders and a moss stitch infill. Moss stitch is an elongated version of seed stitch in which rows of the same

sequence of knit and purl stitches are worked before they are alternated. This created a rich texture and knobbly, fuzzy, tactile quality for the blanket which, when executed in peach, communicated Tiffany's kitschy aesthetics of warmth, sentimentality, domesticity and love and underscored the weight of Mae's vulnerability and instability.

The blankets also softened the cool, hard architectural features of the set, which featured surfaces of pale wood and Perspex, because knitted items on the stage impart their "artisanal qualities" and capture light through their colour, texture and detail, underscoring their interaction, "with the theatres' space" (Barbieri 2017: 195). This interaction with the set meant that the blankets drifted "between the categories" of costume and scenography by adding to the "multi-sensory aspect" of the scenography (Butterworth and McKinney 2009: 7). For example, Dad's teal blanket was a prop that comforted and warmed him in his hospital bed, but it was also incorporated into Mae's costume as a snug wrap on a winter's morning in Act Two. Wearing the teal blanket allowed Gordon-Anderson to express the connection that Dad and Mae had forged since leaving hospital. By softening the set's hard beds and chairs and dressing the actors' bodies, the blankets acted part-prop/part-costume that provided visual continuity throughout the play and communicated feelings of warmth and vulnerability in a cold, hard world.

Figure 2. Mae and Dad check their recording of "Happy Birthday to Jenny" in the Sydney 2018 production of *You Got Older*. Left to right: Mae (Harriet Gordon-Anderson), Dad (Steve Rodgers). Costume design, Emily Brayshaw. Photo credit: Clare Hawley.

### **Emily unravels for Wenatchee**

Finding a teal blanket was difficult, but I had a teal scarf that I had never quite liked and decided to unravel the scarf and use the wool to knit the blanket. The process of

unravelling the scarf and knitting Dad's blanket, however, provided deeper insights from a material culture perspective into the "relationships between people and the role that objects play in those relationships" (Andrew 2008: 44). Unravelling the scarf and reknitting a blanket, more than making any other item, clarified for me why Barron likely chose knitting as a metaphor and powerful visual symbol within *You Got Older*. It took 20 minutes to unravel the scarf, which was much longer than expected, because I had to stop, unpick the snags and smooth the wool whenever the fibres caught and pulled against each other before I could resume unravelling it. It quickly became apparent from literally unravelling the scarf why the metaphor of unravelling can be applied to a person's emotional state; a breakdown may either happen quickly or over time as a person hits blocks and snags in their life and circumstances.

The process of unravelling a knitted garment leaves a large, formless pile of yarn that must be quickly wound into a ball as tangled yarn can be difficult to knit with. Similarly, a person who breaks down also requires care and attention in order to prevent their condition worsening. In addition, yarn from an unravelled knitted garment often continues to hold a wavy shape from the stitches, even when re-wound into a new ball. These waves can also be present in the new knitted garment if the knitter chooses not to steam or "block" them out when the garment is finished (steaming/blocking relaxes the fibres and smooths them). The waves in the yarn, although almost imperceptible to the audience, were still visible in the plain stitch rows of Dad's blanket. I chose not to block the teal blanket because the waves ascribed "layered meanings" of mental and physical unravelling to the costumed bodies on stage, which communicated, "viscerally human complexities, releasing their power in the performance" (Barbieri 2017: 238). The waves therefore showed the trauma of the unravelled yarn, but revealed that something new and comforting could be created from an object that has been completely pulled



apart. In this way, too, I wanted the teal blanket, and Mae's wearing it as a wrap to symbolise a hope that Mae could rebuild her life, however imperceptible this meaning would be to the audience and the actors.

## **Conclusion and considerations**

The last scene of *You Got Older*, the 'Hardy Family Dance Party', affords the actors, characters and audience alike a sense of catharsis after the intense, tragic events of the play. Araujo posits that, "Persistence and everlastingness are in fact typical features of pattern-based processes of fabrication" (2010: 187). While the costumes for the dance party did not include knitted items, the scenography for the party scene was the bedroom in Mae's new apartment and her peach blanket was folded neatly on the end of her bed. The presence of the peach blanket communicated that the Hardy family has remained close-knit, despite Mae's unravelling and even though Dad's death has left a hole in the fabric of their lives by visually ascribing the layered meanings around knitting onto the stage.

*You Got Older* is a contemporary, text-based play and as such there is much scope for scholars to consider processes and themes of knitting within costume design in other performance genres. For example, designer Julie Lynch's exquisite costumes for the 2019/20 Opera Australia production of Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* (1896) included hand-knitted gloves, scarves and shawls. These items were sourced by the production's Wardrobe Buyer, Miranda Brock, via online craft businesses and made to Lynch's designs and specifications. This allowed the production to, "support small homemakers while ensuring everyone on stage looked different".<sup>3</sup> The scale of knitting required to costume such a production could, therefore, be a subject of study, for

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<sup>3</sup> <https://opera.org.au/home/productions/la-boheme/making-the-costumes>.

example, as could the aesthetics and techniques used to construct the knitted items, or the role of knitting within 1930s Berlin, which was the setting of this particular production of *La Bohème*.

This article has discussed how themes and action of knitting in *You Got Older* are an exploration of the tensions in Mae's attempts to safeguard control of her domestic environment, her identity and her emotions during a traumatic time in her life. These tensions are heightened within the play as Mae's knitting locks her into a pattern of negative activity that reflects her unravelling. The act of knitting, which is often a source of comfort, provides no comfort for Mae; rather the only solace she can find is in her fantasies of the Cowboy, and even these are interrupted, painful and terrifying. Furthermore, the aesthetics, techniques, and processes discussed here demonstrate how the knitted costumes and props were designed to be deliberately unobtrusive in order to support the actors and to let them, and the dialogue, dazzle the audience. Hand-knitting many of the costumes and props for *You Got Older* also helped the actors and the audience to make sense of the symbolic and material worlds of the play and gave me, the designer, greater insight into the systems and processes involved in creating and representing these worlds. Letting the actors see and understand the act of knitting also helped them communicate to the audience that it was unlikely that Mae, or the Hardy siblings, would completely block out the waves of grief that informed their new lives without Dad. The patterns in the Hardys' lives may have changed, but being a close-knit family from a close-knit community means that their relationships, their love, and their care for each other will persist and help them to rebuild new lives after a tragedy.

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The cast of the Mad March Hare production of *You Got Older* (2018) comprised:

Harriet Gordon-Anderson: Mae Hardy

Steve Rodgers: Dad

Gareth Rickards: Cowboy Luke

Cody Ross: Mac

Alex Beaman: Matt Hardy

Ainslie McGlynn: Hannah Hardy

Sarah Meacham: Jenny Hardy

Set design: Isabel Hudson

Director: Claudia Barrie

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## Figures

Figure 1. The Hardy family siblings in the Hospital Scene of the Sydney 2018 production of *You Got Older*. Left to right: Mae (Harriet Gordon-Anderson), Hannah (Ainsley McGlynn), and Matthew (Alex Beaumann). Costume design, Emily Brayshaw. Photo credit: Clare Hawley.

Figure 2. Mae and Dad check their recording of “Happy Birthday to Jenny” in the Sydney 2018 production of *You Got Older*. Left to right: Mae (Harriet Gordon-Anderson), Dad (Steve Rodgers). Costume design, Emily Brayshaw. Photo credit: Clare Hawley.