This practice-led contemporary performance study investigates and invigorates the diva icon’s usefulness to feminist theatre praxis. It traces the research journey from an unexamined belief in the diva as an icon of empowered, independent and expressive womanhood, to a more nuanced conception of the diva as boundless feminist performer and philosophical subject. Two major questions emerge from and drive the process. The primary research question asks: How can the diva icon (in all her fury and glory and wretchedness and perversity and mastery and mortality) usefully inform a feminist theatre praxis? Early investigations give rise to a subsequent social query: How do (some) women collude in their own oppression; participate in their voice and voicelessness? Critically engaging with these challenges leads me to conclude the diva icon is most useful to feminist performance praxis when understood as an icon for the richest possible expression of one’s multifaceted, contradictory, poetic and polyphonic self in dialogue with other internal selves, and with one’s community and world.

The study is framed by poststructural feminism in an (at times, uneasy) alliance with psychoanalysis, Jungian psychology, structuralism, positive humanism, and eastern philosophies such as yoga and Buddhism. The process of knowledge-making is experienced as embodied and non-linear, with key insights resonating in the spaces between the questions, the methodology, the literature and the praxis. It has been composed of: the creation of a solo performance; a daily astanga yoga practice; interviews with three senior Australian women practitioners who have referenced the diva icon in their own work; and a contextual review mapping the cultural and aesthetic territory of divas and contemporary female solo performance (literature reviews, performance reviews, popular culture reviews). It also critically engages the provocations of feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous (among others), and with those of philosopher, poet and performer Margaret Cameron.

Throughout this study the diva is in dialogue: with western myth (romantic love, the handless maiden), with theory (voice, desire, the feminine divine), and with practice (the dramaturgy of breath). This critical dialogue reveals the diva’s capacity for agency, poetry, divinity and mastery that enable her to resist, embrace and receive in ways that offer new possibilities of Being/Isness. From this, I suggest the transcendent voice of reason is, for the female philosophical subject, the diva voice: simultaneously divine and corporeal, located [heard] in the infinite moment between an out-breath and the returning in-breath, inhalation, inspiration. In the final analysis, the feminist performer can be empowered by transforming the the diva’s traditional cry “Lascietemi morir,” (let me die) to “Lascietemi aprire”, (let me open).
But Fleming’s performance is so youthful and bell-like in tone, and so much fun as she clips through the intricate runs and ornaments that characterize Gounod’s writing for the soprano voice, that it quickly becomes one of the more memorable tracks. Massenet’s “J’ai versé” from Cléopâtre also has its roots in the heart of the nineteenth century, but it is a later work than most of Massenet’s more familiar operas, and it didn’t receive its first performance until 1914. It has a concentrated sexuality that flirts with sorrow and seduction at the same time.