Articles

Messing with the Wrong Guise?
Creating Subversive Work in a "Creative Economy" that Celebrates Subversion

By Tim Cowbury

Abstract

This article engages in a practice-based critical reflection on the work that went into making my theatre "company" Made In China's show *Gym Party*. It focuses on an affective climate of working practices and conditions that might be said to shape the politics of staged work in often-undocumented ways. The article begins with a snapshot of *Gym Party*'s ostentatiously messy work process within the UK's "fringe" scene and considers the creatively subversive connotations such work might typically be seen to have. I then outline some paradoxical aspects of the economic and cultural contexts in which the work took place, in order to suggest that such mess-making might in fact have been rendered somewhat toothless as a subversive creative strategy. The article figures *Gym Party*'s making as an example of "put-on" performances of work process and of messily subversive politics: performances endemic not just to theatre or art but to the so-called creative economy more generally. Exploring affective pressures surrounding such a worker's performance, I suggest these pressures represent not just structural causes of that performance, but—in their erosion of worker's well-being and institutionalisation of precarity—a means of worker exploitation. I show how these pressures manifest in conflicting expectations of productivity, pleasure, and protest from the work. And I suggest that such expectations can lead to the submerging—though, crucially, not a total negation—of a more productive politics and genuinely protestive mess in the completed artwork: the subtly self-reflexive staging of affective pressures and their attendant exploitation.

1. Introducing the Guise

Jess stands in front of a small audience. She smiles at them, wine in hand, surrounded by an abundance of flowers and cakes, vases and crockery. I sit at a few inches behind the back row of the audience, playing Nick Cave into a portable PA system. I cut the music and Jess starts talking, seemingly

autobiographically. Our collaborator Ira wanders on, joining Jess in amiable chitchat and traded monologues faintly tethered to the concept we are building a show around. After a while, Ira wanders off. I shove the three lighting faders up to full and put on some overloud thrashy music, cuing Jess to destroy the entire stage image. The biggest vase—first to go—is hurled at the wall and takes a chunk out of it. Jess stops when every smashable thing in sight is smashed. Ira returns and the two of them pick bits of cake out of the debris, stare out at the audience, smile and finish their wines. The room smells of icing sugar, sweat, cheap booze, and pollen. The music is still playing, and realising I need to cut both lights and sound simultaneously to finish the performance, I stretch from my seat to yank the plug powering both out of its wall socket. The Artistic Director of the venue happens to be sitting nearby, and sees me. As I pull the plug, the room descends into pitch dark and silence, save for the chuckle of the Artistic Director, who—as I wrestle the plug back into the wall and bring the lights fizzling on—is shaking his head, laughing, and leading the patchy applause.

Is this what subversive creative work looks like? It is work that seems to have many of the messy trappings of protest against the conservative capitalist order of the day.[1] Violent action destroys a veneer of twee cosiness and saccharine narrative of "all is well here" to reveal the dead-end mess that lies beneath. Property is damaged and "bourgeois" trinkets are systematically smashed. Any faith from the audience in the opening illusion of contentment is revealed as misplaced; their very safety is threatened by flying sharp objects, unpredictable improvisation and a sense that anything could happen in this thrown-together moment. The established rules of the theatre, the city, and our society do not hold firm here.

So this *is* what subversive creative work looks like, right? If you're actually asking me then, no, I don't actually think so—not anymore. But perhaps, at the time of this particular performance, as part of wider

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1 This performance took place in London in late 2011: a year characterised by protest and rioting in the newly Conservative Party-led and austerity-bound UK as well as revolutionary and armed struggles in several countries across the Middle East.

structural processes I will explore below, I did. The scene sketched above took place as Made In China, the theatre "company" I co-lead, first began making our show *Gym Party*.[2] Then, I was a young playwright who had entered the workforce just as the 2008 recession began to bite. I was quickly cooling on the established theatre scene, the solitary and unwaged daily labour of playwriting, and the disconnected role such labour had to its product (its realisation on stage). I was hot on "doing it myself" by getting my hands dirty in "fringe" venues, collaborating with theatre-makers and performance artists over directors and actors, and working—sometimes even for money—messily in the murky spaces between playwriting and contemporary performance. Now, although I am still working in more or less the same spaces and ways, I have also become an academic researcher with an ongoing, but more circumspect, interest in this work's ability to subvert dominant political narratives. I find myself questioning the mess, specifically both its curious performativity and the political implications of this. My exploration in this article attempts to look back from this 'now' to that 'then'. I will use my own experience of labouring as one of two co-leaders of the four person team that created *Gym Party* as a case study for the mess that might characterise supposedly subversive work in the UK's self-proclaimed "creative economy". This case study will tease out otherwise-obscured clues about how messy creative work might amount to a self-negating "put-on" performance or *guise* of subversion, whilst also containing the potential for a more genuine subversion rooted in its labour conditions.

   Such an enquiry into the messiness of *Gym Party* is intended to unfold in its own slightly messy manner. I aim to explore how apparent constraints or failures surrounding the politics of artworks and

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2 Though we typically use the word "company", Made In China is, to-date, not a company in any official sense; rather it is the project work of myself (playwright/theatre-maker) and Jessica Latowicki (theatre-maker and performer), often supported by independent producer Beckie Darlington and sometimes collaborating with other theatre-makers. *Gym Party* was co-created by Jessica and me with Ira Brand and Christopher Brett Bailey; it premiered at Summerhall, Edinburgh in August 2013.

art-work*ing* might, paradoxically, be sites of subversive potential. And I seek examples and ways of knowing not just from within my own practice-experience but in some less-than-traditional places within that experience. I entangle these approaches—which follow at a distance the methodologies of affect theory and autoethnographic research—with ideas rooted and expressed in more conventional scholarship. Writing in this entangled way, I explore how norms of theatre-making labour— ones I experienced first-hand—might perpetuate political assumptions and internalised exploitative practices bound up in theatre's positioning as a "creative industry" within a wider "creative economy". By drawing attention to the problematic *affective* power (a la Berlant 2011 and Halberstam 2011) of these norms on myself and my collaborators, I seek to highlight experiences I perceive to be impacting the politics of theatre work when it arrives on the stage. Perhaps because of the way that 'affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness' (Gregg and Seigworth 4), the nuanced relationship between this politics of work*ing* and of resulting work can often be overlooked. If the "creative economy" of the twenty-first century exploits and quietens its workers whilst seeming to offer freedom and voice to them, it does not do so centre stage, lit up in front of an audience, but rather just out of view, behind the scenes. So while I will eventually consider aspects of *Gym Party's* messy on-stage travails, I will primarily discuss the more dimly lit, unadorned, and everyday mess of theatre-making labour that preceded and surrounded the finished show.

2. Behind the Guise

The making of *Gym Party* began, then, at a time when my collaborative theatre practice with Made In China rarely ended without some kind of mess made or mark left on the space we were working in. The crockery-eviscerating "scratch"[3] illustrated at the start of this article was one of a

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3 Scratch is a term for a public performance of work-in-progress, coined at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC), London. BAC, not coincidentally, is one of venues that co-commissioned *Gym Party*.

large number of work-in-progress showings and residencies undertaken in the genesis of the show. In each, we worked over the space, the performers, and sometimes the audience with goods usually cobbled together from supermarkets and charity shops. For example: canned whipped cream shaken and sprayed like graffiti, whole packets of marshmallows crammed into mouths and regurgitated, cups of Skittles hurled by audiences at performers and overripe tomatoes spread across the space and stomped to a pulp.

I now connect this mess to certain perceptions and desires on my part as co-lead artist at the time. I perceived that I was working in theatre spaces that were either oppressively anodyne, neat, sanitised, and corporate-feeling, or only available to me when not in prioritised use for private events, outreach activities, or "capital works" building scheme renovations. I desired to demonstrate that, on the rare occasions I was permitted to use these spaces, very concrete and disruptive work was being done in them. The mess we made denoted an autonomy, authenticity, and creativity that the wider work context I was in (the theatre "industry" but also the wider British economy) did not seem to encourage. I supposed that our visceral and violent acts of mess-making would shake awake whatever slumberous people, systems, and settings I perceived we worked in and amongst. In the process as well as product of a collaboratively-created piece like *Gym Party,* I had a self-conscious sense of participating in collective action, grabbing attention through striking activity (if not acti*vism*) and being productive in a deliberately abrasive and non-conformist way.

What is it, then, about these particular claims to subversion that makes them ring somewhat hollow to me now? First of all, economists Boltanski and Chiapello argue that by the mid-1990s *dominant* socio-economic conceptions of labour actually accommodated the desire for autonomy, authenticity, and creativity through work. They suggest this is due to capitalism shifting to occupy the territory held by the very forces that *critiqued* capitalism most fiercely in the late 1960s (embodied by "les evenéments" in Paris). As such, 'the qualities that are guarantees of success in this new spirit [of capitalism…] are taken directly from the

repertoire of May 1968' (97). Cultural critic Mark Fisher emphasises this by suggesting that 'in many ways, the left has never recovered from being wrong-footed by Capital's mobilization and metabolization of the desire for emancipation from the Fordist routine' (34). So not only did capitalism absorb the values, styles, and modes of a popular anti-capitalism, but some anti-capitalism continues to not know what hit it. Fisher notes how from the 1980s onwards, activism came to be performed by those at the top of the capitalist hierarchy, with 2007's *Live 8* the apotheotic example; he suggests that contemporary culture, when appearing ironically critical of capitalism, often merely '*performs* our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity' (12, my emphasis). Essentially, cultural objects and events can posture rebellion on our behalf, so we don't have to go through with it. And they do so almost as a matter of course: from high to low culture, from mainstream to alternative spaces, messing with the establishment (or at least seeming to) is the order of the day.

In this light, the kind of ostentatiously messy aspects of making *Gym Party* outlined above, though intended to be subversive, in fact now belong to the order I was trying to mess with. Moreover, Fisher suggests that I could have been *performing* messy and acting subversive—and encouraging my collaborators to follow suit—as part of wider trends within capitalism. But if we were giving such a performance, it seems we were far from alone, since today, 'the criticism and the provocativeness of art seem to be a part of the exploitation of human powers' (Kunst 1) endemic to capitalism. As such, the widespread 'call for the politicization of art' (7) could be merely a sign of what Slavoj Žižek (cited by Kunst) calls ' "pseudo-activity" ' (ibid) characteristic of capitalist societies. In other words, contemporary art's tendency to busy itself with politics may be a 'put-on' act in which 'political engagement on the part of the artist is changed into a burlesque or a fashion trend' (151).[4]

Research into contemporary cultural policy in the UK deepens

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4 Kunst's reference to burlesque/fashion does not seem intended as a comment on these forms, rather as a way to illuminate a mostly accidental slippage of self-consciously political art into a parody of itself.

this understanding of performative subversion and helps illuminate the pressurised ways that *Gym Party* might have been "putting it on". Since 1997, the UK has attempted to catalyse Boltanski and Chiapello's 'new spirit of capitalism' by conceiving itself as a "creative economy" bursting with creative industries.[5] Official government policy sought to 'free the creative potential of individuals' in a society in which—as much-repeated policy slogans of the 2000s proclaimed—'everyone is creative' (Bishop 14). This national approach came laden with bureaucratising 'regimes of managerialism, instrumentalism, centralization and oversight' (Hewison 7). For example, in the 2000s, Arts Council England (ACE), who provided the vast majority of *Gym Party*'s funding, came to be overseen by a new body called the Quality, Efficiency and Standards Team. This made central government funding conditional on 'quantified improvements in outputs, efficiency, access, quality promotion, income generation or private sector funding' (68). Hewison suggests that the effect of such developments is arguably 'oxymoronic, since the object of creativity is to produce something that is unique, and the object of industry is to produce something that is profitably repeatable' (41).

Fisher's enjoyably uncompromising term for such oxymoronic processes on wide scale is 'Market Stalinism'. He defines this as 'new kinds of bureaucracy—"aims and objectives", "outcomes", "mission statements" that paradoxically proliferate in societies that present themselves as "anti-bureaucratic" and "anti-Stalinist"' (40). So, the more creativity is trumpeted in the contemporary context, perhaps, the more box-ticking bureaucratic baggage it comes laden with. I would argue that creativity, moreover, increasingly transfers away from the creative work itself into the inventive bureaucratic and self-representational work around it. In my own practice, this inventive bureaucracy takes the form of applications and reports that I experience as exercises in language comprehension and creative writing more than the statement of facts. This bureaucracy also includes extensive networking and liaising with

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5 At the instigation of this ongoing policy there were thirteen officially recognised creative industries, including fields such as computer software services alongside those like performing arts.

producers, promoters, and marketing teams. In such situations, I have poured creative energy into tallying and justifying the subversive work made by Made In China. And through this prism, I now see my work on projects like *Gym Party* as being caught in a web of often *contradictory* expectations around the kind of performance I give as a worker. On one hand, I am supposed to create freely and autonomously in true artistic fashion; on the other hand, I need to rigorously measure, represent, and deliver products of this labour according to criteria and timescales set by institutional forces (ACE, venues, festivals, media outlets featuring and reviewing the work). In my experience, these contradictory expectations can create a quite particular and punishing level of pressure around a working performance.

Synthesising theory and practice-experience, I identify three often contradictory strands of pressure placed on artistic work and workers. Firstly, there is the specific manifestation of *the pressure to embody creative subversion* discussed above. As experimental, alternative, or fringe theatre (labels often foisted on me) that straddles contemporary performance and playwriting (labels I often invoke), my work is positioned in one of the more self-consciously creative *and* politically engaged parts of the "creative industries". Thus, when we baffled, unsettled, and endangered audiences with flying shards of broken crockery taking chunks out of the studio wall, the Artistic Director was the first to applaud, which told us early-career artists that such a mess was exactly the sort of thing we had been invited there to make. Secondly, there is *the pressure to be enjoying such work*. Artistic work is supposed to be so satisfyingly *pleasurable* that it is 'not work at all in the narrative of exchange of labour for monetary compensation' (O'Brien 83). As such, 'creative workers are seen as being "paid for their hobby" rather than paid as *workers* for their labour power' (ibid). This, as I explain below in relation to the final stages of *Gym Party*'s making process, creates some particularly acute challenges for creative work. Thirdly, there is *the pressure to productively produce*. In a creative "industry", industrious*ness* is expected. This pressure is felt by artists operating as temporary "guest" workers in theatre buildings more permanently and numerously

occupied by salaried Producers, Managers and Officers (marketing, events, engagement, fundraising et cetera).[6] Making *Gym Party,* I was conscious of this disparity between the 'great number of intermediators whose task is to constantly establish, check and contextualize the value of art' (Kunst 218) and myself. The 'intermediators' seemed to always be labouring busily at their desks or ploughing through meetings, while we artists messed around in the rehearsal studio trying to be playful but also summon a productivity that might keep us in step with (and in work at) the building.

These pressures discordantly combine in the overt bureaucracy of measurement already alluded to, such as grant applications, interim reports and evaluations. But crucially, I believe they manifest in subtle forms of bureaucratic measurement that involve internalisations of 'Market Stalinism' *within the artist*. In the making and performing of works like *Gym Party*, this measurement can take various forms. They include "check-ins" with the salaried producers upon whom our temporary employment depended. Provided under the auspices of being creatively helpful, in the case of *Gym Party* these were often rather disruptive and increased the pressure on us to perform our progressive labours. Meanwhile, an unlikely pinnacle of theatre's manifestation of the 'Market Stalinist' work(er) performance might be located in the kind of work-in-progress moments such as the one I began by sketching here. As we travelled the country smashing, consuming, and smearing stuff across studios and stages—providing raw, unfiltered and semi-improvised views into an ongoing artistic process—our "scratches" of *Gym Party* may have looked like anything but bureaucracy. Yet to ACE, such work-in-progress performances demonstrate 'public engagement' and 'artistic development': watchwords that currently dominate funding

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6 Hewison suggests that in the years following the initial adoption of the 'creative industries' label, 'as many as half the workers in the creative industries were not doing anything creative' (41). Additionally, Kunst cites Robert Pfaller's survey of visual arts in Germany: 'there are at least two curators and agents per artist nowadays' (180). Transposed to my residencies at studio and midscale UK theatres, these seem like conservative figures; I estimate that I am typically outnumbered by non-artist workers four, five, or six to one.

criteria a great deal more than, say, artistic vision.[7]

Here we might glimpse how in the theatre-as-workplace, just as in other parts of the creative economy, 'work becomes geared towards the generating and massaging of representations rather than to the official goals of the work itself' (Fisher 42). Making *Gym Party,* we spent a great deal of our creative time preparing material for whatever "scratch" was taking place in a given week; and we mostly did so instead of figuring out what we wanted the eventual piece (the 'official goal of the work') to be. Exemplifying the way artists specifically 'must be skilled at numerous creative ways of making work visible' (Kunst 140),[8] we felt compelled to offer a strong *representation* of the work we were still in the midst of doing to the people who were paying for it to be done. Across the 'creative economy', this process can frequently see workers perform or represent *themselves*. As O'Brien says, 'the flexible, adaptable, self-directing individual […] becomes a commodity to be traded' (82). Making *Gym Party,* we certainly traded performances of ourselves as working artists in for cash, receiving a few thousand pounds in return for "scratches" at a collection of regional theatre festivals. Here, we were subject to unsolicited feedback and even star-ratings from audiences, promoters, and reviewers. As such, we perhaps exemplified how 'the artist in contemporary society has become a prototype of the contemporary flexible and precarious worker' (Kunst 137).

This affords a view of the affective aspects of *Gym Party*'s work process—symbolised by its many "scratches" and manifesting as multi-stranded, contradictory pressure on myself and my collaborators as we did the work—as a kind of mess that our ostentatiously messy performances seemingly left out. Contrary to the explicit aim of helping us progress creatively, we experienced "scratches" as a creativity-sapping

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7 On ACE project funding applications for up to £15,000, artists are currently permitted 675 words to explain the public engagement and artist development aspects of their project, and only 150 words to explain the artistic vision itself.

8 Kunst, citing Pfaller, suggests that 'actual artistic work only has a decreasing 10 per cent share in comparison to studying the market, self-marketing, public relations, branding, socializing etc.' (180).

bureaucratic burden. Under the combined pressures of "living up" to the expectations of creative subversion and pleasure-at-work while "keeping up" with the culture of productivity we found ourselves in, we spent excessive energy on hollow acts of these things, paradoxically demonstrating productivity through destructive acts of performance. Crucially, such acts were destructive not just to our surroundings, audiences or to the politically subversive potential of the work. They were also destructive to *ourselves*. We were ground down physically and mentally by the process: working late, drinking lots, losing sleep, panicking through long stretches of workdays, failing to communicate with each other, and damaging relationships. As such, I can now identify my experience making *Gym Party* as evidence of the 'parallels between rising incidence of mental distress and new patterns of assessing a worker's performance' (Fisher 37).

Any such mental distress is perhaps particularly acute for *artistic* workers because of the second strand of affective pressure outlined above, whereby artists are considered privileged workers because we supposedly "do something we love". If artists internalise this pressure in their assessed performances of work*ing,* then the way that any sense of pleasure or privilege is often 'lost in the conditions of insecurity, long hours and low pay' (O'Brien 83) becomes somewhat *unspeakable*. Although I struggled for artistic satisfaction, financial stability, and well-being as I made *Gym Party,* in what felt like a fulfilment of my artistic role and identity, I *suppressed* these struggles at the time. In doing so, I perhaps denied the possibility that these struggles were part of wider structural processes of the 'new spirit of capitalism' manifesting in the UK's "creative economy". The way that *Gym Party* went on to receive acclaim, including in the national press, for its creative and subversive qualities, only seemed to justify this approach at the time. Yet I would now argue that this acclaim extended the structural and affective process at play. Such public and favourable assessments of our worker's performance in *Gym Party*—which we used to evidence Made In China's positive impact in Arts Council reports—encouraged us to bury big questions about the quality and completeness of our

artwork. Exhausted and relieved to gain credible stamps of approval upon premiering the show, we avoided these lingering artistic questions as well as the then-unspeakable ones about our pressurised working conditions.

3. Guise, We See Through You

It is tempting, at this point, to conclude that in denying the validity and structural causes of our struggles in making *Gym Party,* we were negating the political potential of the artwork, as well as participating in the exploitation of ourselves as art workers. However, as a final turn here I want to suggest that we may – in part unwittingly – have left traces of this exploitation in the finished show. I will demonstrate how this perhaps partially-accidental engagement with internalised labour exploitation manifested by briefly considering *Gym Party's* onstage exploits.

The final version of *Gym Party* was structured around three rounds of games played by the performers: comically strenuous physical tasks, a live audience opinion poll on the performer's personalities, and a dance contest in which the winning performer was the one who managed to get an audience member to dance with them first. These games degraded from silly, messy fun to bitter, painful going-through-of-the-motions; the scoring system appeared increasingly unfair, while punishments for the games' losers became harsher. Each round of games was followed by short winner's speeches that ironically quoted then-Prime Minister David Cameron's 'Aspiration Nation' rhetoric (trumpeting the competitive spirit of the winningly entrepreneurial UK).[9] These competitive sections were interspersed with longer texts and synchronised dances involving all three performers. Amounting to

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9 The Cameron government's 'Aspiration Nation' sloganeering was first used in the Prime Minister's speech at the Conservative Party conference in 2012, just after the UK had won a record number of medals at the London Olympics. The speech, featuring lines directly quoted in *Gym Party* such as 'we can all be winners' and 'we know what it takes to win in the tough world of today', used the analogy of sporting success to urge people out of widespread unemployment into a labour market becoming increasingly characterised by precarious work.

sustained collective blitzes of verbosity and physicality, these moments saw upbeat language and moves undercut by the darkening mood of the show and by the wear and tear inflicted on the space and performers. As such, the audience was encouraged to reflect more and more on the destructive unsustainability and inequality of this mess, and on their own participation in its degrading trajectory. Locking these elements into the script as we approached the premiere of the show, I recall very consciously intending this collaboratively-crafted mess to enact an explicit subversive critique of the dominant political narrative of day.

Although dramaturgically coherent, these elements, in the context of my argument here, mainly seem to suggest the ostentatious *guise* of mess that I have argued *Gym Party* donned. How, then, did a more implicit critique of the labour conditions we experienced while making the show appear from behind this messy guise? I believe the answer lies in the way our messy making process delivered a show with enough cracks and gaps in its façade for the mess of making to leak through. For example, *Gym Party*'s performers spent each show labouring beneath a backdrop of their own names spelled out in giant neon letters. There was in fact meant to be significantly more set design, but because of the fraught process resulting from the affective pressures already outlined, the neon name-signs were all that we ended up with. Almost by accident, then, we starkly embodied O'Brien's observation (82) that contemporary workers frequently perform their own identities in order to get gigs: 'my name's Chris […] and I'm here because I'm paid to be here' says co-creator and performer Christopher Brett Bailey at the start of the show, standing beneath his own name up in lights. Furthermore, any glamour associated with this initially comic and unabashedly entertaining gig work was undercut by the intensive laboriousness inherent to the performances. The dances were rarely perfected by performers who had little or no dance training; the games were often either so physically demanding as to bring the performers to the point of nausea and injury, or so inanely debasing as to bring out in them a palpable sense of shame or reluctance to play.

In these kinds of ways, the final show (and its repeated

performance through runs and tours) was a degrading and repetitive cycle of physically and emotionally draining tasks for the performer-as-worker. The performance highlighted this cyclicality by including visual clues from the previous show in the start of the current one, like (fake) blood trickling from the noses of the performers who had lost. So blurred was the line between the "put-on" messy guise and the onstage messed-up guys that, more than once, audience-members approached a performer post-show concerned about their well-being; they thought the fake nose-bleeds were real signs of off-stage drug-abuse, a coping mechanism symbolic of the mental strain involved in being an artistic labourer in an affectively intense labour market.

Our messily fraught labour of making the show can therefore be conceived as not buried undetectably behind its "put-on" subversive façade but rather oozing detectably through the cracks and gaps in that façade. This process was accentuated by the ongoing unfavourable labour conditions surrounding performances of the 'finished version' of *Gym Party*. We premiered the show at the notoriously gruelling Edinburgh Fringe festival, receiving a nominal fee of £100 each for 14 performances with an expectation of future paid touring across the UK. This touring materialised in the form of intermittent dates (about twenty-five performances, spread across a year) with payments of £120 for each of us per show, which averaged to less than £60 per day when factoring travel and overnight stays. With a laborious air of making and performing in the "gig economy" permeating the performances, I would argue that the completed show could not help but communicate a sense of how 'the creative sector finds itself full of young people who are burnt out, exhausted […] often self-exploiting on the basis of the 'pleasure in work' factor' (O'Brien 82). The affective expressions of labour critique may have made their presence felt all the more given that, as *Gym Party* toured the UK in 2014, precarious labour was establishing itself as the new normal across multiple sectors of the economy.

In the end, then, *Gym Party* might just have provided a kind of creative subversion with some genuinely subversive purchase in a "creative economy" that celebrates subversion. The forms of labour

exploitation undergone in making the show, regardless of my own initial resolution to remain silent, may have resonated within the increasingly jaded *exploits* of the performers on stage. Whilst we aimed directly for one kind of protestive messing and "put-on" subversion against the dominant narrative of competitive capitalism, we ended up instead stumbling across a perhaps subtler and more specific subversion of the labour inequities we experienced as we toured the show.

These new theoretical discoveries have influenced my own creative practice to begin developing self-reflexive theatrical performances that are better able to intricately critique—rather than only repeat or extend—the pressured worker's performance that creates them. As part of this, I hope that the perspectives offered here might help seed performances that can utilize the sometimes-fiendish levels of paradox encountered in their context of creation. Certainly, it is my belief that by facing up to the awkward nuances and structural factors in how we work—and in how we *think* we work—workers such as myself might contribute to wider progress in the politics of our supposedly progressive sectors. In this spirit, I will conclude by playfully reconfiguring theatre theorist Alan Read's arresting image in which '[f]orever claiming its political potential, theatre, like the university of the last eight centuries, might be perceived as having been excluded from any kind of actual political power' (75). There may be no neat theoretical or theatrical solution to such a situation. But in light of the above discussion, I propose a final paradoxical lesson from the mess of *Gym Party*. A theatre that (if it proclaims anything) proclaims its own labourers' very exclusion from political power—now *that* might just be a theatre that begins to activate its political potential.

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