



*Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts*

Vol. 14, No. 1&2

Autumn 2020

~~THEATRES~~  
~~OF LABOUR~~

ISSN: 1751-0171

*Platform*, Vol. 14, No. 1 & 2, Theatres of Labour, Autumn 2020

***Platform: Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts***

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***Platform* is based at, and generously supported by, the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance, Royal Holloway, University of London**

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**Submission Information**

*Platform: Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts* is published twice annually. Contributions are particularly welcome from postgraduate researchers, postdoctoral researchers, and early-career academics in theatre and performing arts. We welcome the submission of academic papers, performance responses, photo essays, book reviews, interviews, and new dramatic writing. *Platform* also welcomes practice-based research papers.

Papers should not exceed 4500 words (including notes and references). Practice-based papers should normally include images in JPEG format (300ppi). Reviews should be around 1000 words. Photo essays should not exceed 2000 words and 10 pictures. All contributions should be formatted according to the MLA style guidelines (see Gibaldi's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*) and should include a 200-word abstract of the article submitted as well as the article itself. Authors should also send a 50-word bio with their submission. Submissions should be sent electronically as email attachments to [platform-submissions@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:platform-submissions@rhul.ac.uk).

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Issue and cover design: Meg Cunningham

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## *Editorial*

This double issue entitled ‘Theatres of Labour’ comes at a time when the labour of theatre, the logistics of live performance, and the lives of those making a living from theatre are the subjects of much public debate. When COVID-19 brought about the abrupt halt of almost all live theatrical production in spring 2020, it threw into sharp relief the theatre industry’s interdependencies and left not only individual theatre professionals, but whole businesses and industries in a lurch. As many workers in the arts sector faced further precarisation, commentators and campaigners turned towards economic arguments to justify the labour of theatre and lobby for its future. They brandished statistics and studies on the contributions of theatre and the arts to the GDP (Toynbee 2020), cited them as ‘drivers for tourism’ (Lewis 2020), or pointed to the impending ‘cultural catastrophe’ that a projected drop of £74bn in revenue would mean for the UK economy (Brown 2020). When faced with an unprecedented economic crisis, the theatre industry’s instinct seems to have been to defend itself by pointing to its economic significance. And while many lamented the hundreds of thousands of jobs in danger of being lost, few considered the actual labours performed in these jobs or how they relate to other now endangered jobs, such as in the service industry. Yet, theatre practitioners and scholars have, for some time now, thought about the connections between theatrical labour and other forms of contemporary work, and asked how theatrical performance can stage issues of labour politics. This issue offers a contribution to this debate, and while largely conceived before the outbreak of the pandemic and the consequent lockdown, the pieces in this issue still speak to this peculiar moment in theatre history.

When we first envisioned this issue of *Platform*, we took our cue from several scholars who have analysed theatre and performance *as if* they stand in for labour practices in post-industrial societies. Unlike other contributions that examine labour and working conditions in the art industries (like Harvie 2013, Kunst 2015, Gillick 2016), these scholars

look at the stage as an allegory for contemporary working practices and a commentary on forms of physical, emotional, and cognitive labour. Rather than macro-inspections of the industry and institutions within the field of cultural production, they employ a performance analysis to make claims about how, respectively, labour acts on bodies (Hamera 2012), immaterial work disappears the producer (Ridout 2012), the recipient of services is implicated into the performative nature of the affective economy (Matthews 2017), and the (immersive) spectator reads as a neoliberal subject/worker (Alston 2013). Following these scholarly discussions, our call for contributions for this issue invited scholars and practitioners to reflect on how the material and aesthetic spaces of theatre can illuminate a daily and bodily dimension of work in and beyond artistic performances. With this issue we ask: how does theatre and performance inform and is informed by a materialist and/or artistic reading of labour?

Coincidentally, we were not the only people asking this question. In her keynote at the conference ‘Net-Works: Mapping Labor in Theatre and Performance’ (organised by the Doctoral Theatre Students Association’s of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York) in April 2020, Shannon Jackson asked how we can bring together discourse on immaterial labour—of which a lot has been made in theatre studies over the last few years—with material analyses of labour, especially when it comes to the now ubiquitous modes of internet performances. And in November 2020 a new issue of *Shakespeare Bulletin* (38.1) will turn to ‘Labour in Contemporary Shakespeare Performance’ to bring a critical focus on labour to Shakespeare Studies.

The issue ‘Theatres of Labour’ touches upon many forms of material and immaterial theatre and performance. Some articles directly address the making of performance and theatre production from various roles like dramaturgs, producers, and singers. Others address the training of performers and components of casting or discuss the content of a performance linked to contemporaneous political climates, historical through-lines, and bureaucratic systems. And yet, within this wide array of articles and essays, we see overlapping and

sometimes contrasting arguments. Below we want to briefly outline these interwoven threads illuminating the multiple conceptions of the ‘theatres of labour’.

### **Stage(d) Labour**

Within discussions of theatre and labour, we must define the various areas or types of labour as immaterial, service, affective, and material labours that all sit within the creation and production of theatre. After all, according to art theorist Keti Chukrov, labour ‘cannot be reduced to the thing produced or the labor process. Labor is a form of a person’s vital activity, yet it lies outside the person and is realized in the form of the “things” he or she creates’ (np). When applied to performance, the labours of making and performing can occur within the same person—and even at the same time—but are distinct types of work.

Hansol Oh discusses the many layers of stage(d) labour in her analysis of Tony Kushner’s musical *Caroline, or Change*. Her analysis contrasts the musical performers’ virtuosic labours with the domestic, subjected labours their characters perform on stage; these labours, according to Oh, are spectacularized within the musical machine. Oh discusses the power of an actor’s performance to illuminate historical and gender injustice/inequalities of labour. Tim Cowbury’s analysis of his own performance and production highlights both the act of labouring in Fringe theatre and the contemporaneous labour politics in early twenty-first century Britain. Cowbury’s article illustrates the messy processes of making theatre through word play and autoethnographic description. Both Cowbury and Oh point to the cracks in the performance, which expose the labour involved in its making.

In the realm of performance art, Laurel McLaughlin’s collaborative interview with performance artist Leah Modigliani reveals both her labour of analysing historical speeches about labour equality and the work of enacting her personal interpretation of these speeches. Modigliani’s discursive labours of exposing these historical words to audiences today becomes a rallying cry for advocacy and resistance.



Beth Weinstein's photo essay reveals how she designed a gallery installation in a way as to make complicit the gallery visitor's labour with the labours of her original performances being exhibited. She exposes the spatial labours of her practice-based research project into the erasures of the labour(er)s involved in the construction of internment camps of Japanese Americans during the Second World War and prisoners-of-war camps in Paris during the Algerian War. Weinstein's essay depicts several spatial strategies that engage the visitors in acts of forensic labour while investigating the subject matter at hand.

Each of these contributions conjures its own theatre of labour by contrasting the labour depicted on stage (or in the gallery) with the labour of making the performances.

### **Precarious Labour**

Several other contributors follow Jackson's call for what is needed from theatre scholarship, which is to illuminate the typically 'obscure[d] economic asymmetry within the "creative" class itself' and to reveal the 'relative precarity that some [...] endure over others' (Jackson 23). Laura Kressly and Cowbury both discuss the inner workings involved in British fringe theatre production and performance. Cowbury's article, in which he uses an example from his own experience as a fringe-theatre maker, illuminates not only the complicated (and rarified) process of securing funding in the UK, but also the precariousness of that labour once obtained. Kressly interviews members of a fringe company whose London VAULT Festival 2020 show was cancelled with the onset of the national lock-down. These young theatre makers, as Kressly writes, live in a constant state of precarity that affects many other aspects of their lives, including physical and mental health as well as creative outlets and financial stability.

Martin Young complicates this idea of the theatre worker as a precarious labourer by looking at the performative strategies of protest used by *corps de ballet* dancers of the Paris opera during the national strike in 2019. Reading the bourgeois aesthetics of ballet as ultimately

juxtaposed to the demands of the class struggle, Young argues that the strike performance illuminates the peculiar position these artist-labourers inhabit within the larger movement of the general strike. Young asks to what extent it is productive to align theatrical work with the work of non-artistic workers.

These contributions reveal the precarity of theatre labour—from unstable funding structures to insecure gig work—while also interrogating the way in which the language of ‘precarious labour’ within the context of theatre and performance can conceal materialist differences between artistic and non-artistic labour and obscure conceptual asymmetries between labour theory and performance practice.

### **Resisting and Resistant Labour**

Many contributions touch on the question of how and if performance can resist the all-encompassing logic of contemporary work. They comment on modes of post-Fordist labour, which has transformed many non-artistic workers in the service or communication industries, for example, into people who ‘work like artists’ (Jackson ‘Essential Service’); and therefore, artists’ work is increasingly understood not in terms of labour, but as a ‘calling’. What gets packaged as freedom, self-actualisation, and self-centered entrepreneurialism are actually modes of affective, emotional, and cognitive labour. This label of ‘creative work’ obscures the modes of (self-)exploitation of workers. Contemplating theatrical practices that subvert the idea of creative work as self-exploitation, performance and architectural scholar Juliet Rufford asks: “If performance is a skill set in the sphere of immaterial labour and production, a resistant theatre practice will want to highlight and counter this situation. But how might it do so?” (Rufford 56). Several contributors to this issue provide answers to Rufford, either by questioning their own positions within institutions and the larger arts industry or by offering provocations to the ways labour has previously been conceived in performance theory.

Like Young, Antonia Tretter and Angeliki Roussou question

the role of the artist-labourer and the imperative to perform productive labour in a precarious position in an arts institution or within the wider “creative industries”. In an auto-ethnographic account of her work as a dramaturg in a German municipal theatre, Tretter reflects on the double-bind in which many dramaturgs find themselves where they work as both representatives of a theatre machine and as integral members of individual creative teams. Her account illustrates the limitations of such a doubling of institutional responsibilities and calls for a reconsideration of the role of the dramaturg in state-funded theatres. In her interview artist Shona Macnaughton, Roussou discusses her performance work *Aquatic Needs*, which traces the impact of austerity politics and discourses of aspiration on the realities of artistic production. Macnaughton discusses how the labours of motherhood have made her once again reconsider these connections. Both of these artist-researchers reflect upon their own labour and possible ways of resisting the all-encompassing logics of the institution (in Tretter’s case) and the gig economy (in Macnaughton’s case).

Steyn Bergs and Raimund Rosarius offer provocations to the way artistic labour (or resistance to it) has been perceived. They each theorise ways in which artistic practice might defy a narrative that identifies artistic work with current trends in labour practices. Bergs’ article illuminates the political potential within the seemingly passive and ambivalent state of the recalcitrant bodies depicted in Sophia Ceasar’s artworks. These bodies may neither fully embrace nor completely resist being incorporated into post-Fordist labour practice (labour stances), but they do set up a state of *not yet* resisting. Bergs poses these bodies just on the tipping edge of political resistance as a performative act that may yet become politically fruitful. Rosarius looks at the ways the foundational training at Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts in Berlin might use the metaphor of the *craftsperson* to resist the idea of the future entrepreneurial artist. He argues that stressing the importance of craft in acting through the academy’s training fosters the potential for these actor-students to become self-advocates and campaign for better work environments. This training

also gives students the opportunity to see parallels between their future work and craftspeople which may lead to a forging of seldom-seen solidarity between artists and other workers.

Throughout this issue, several contributors question how artists can build resilience within and towards an often blatantly exploitative arts industry. They highlight considerations of how forms of material and immaterial work coincide in theatre.

### **Labour and Subjectivity**

Kathi Weeks reminds us that many forms of contemporary work ‘require not just the use but the production of subjectivity’ (241), which means that contemporary workers are constantly encouraged and expected to involve their own identity or personality in the performance of their work. The contributions by Jaswinder Balckwell-Pal and Kirstin Smith show that this is as true for a worker in the service industry asked to ‘perform their authentic self’ as for an actor responding to a casting call, who must constantly construct ‘a contextual index of identity’ from which they approach the pressures of casting.

Blackwell-Pal’s article examines the corporate practices of harnessing the authentic identity, or ‘self’, of their employees for their work in the service industry. Through a case study of Pret a Manger’s training practices, Blackwell-Pal reveals the top-down managerial direction of seemingly ‘authentic’ labour undertaken when interacting with customers. She contends that by focusing only on the emotional labour performed by service employees, scholars can miss the corporate, economic, and political contexts these labours are performed within.

Through her discussion of Zawe Ashton’s fictional-auto-biographical account, *Character Breakdown*, Smith analyses an actor’s work as ‘identity work’, which materialises the actor through the act of being cast. This ‘identity work’ has severe consequences for how actors experience their own subjectivity. This is true for all actors, but Smith contends, can be particularly harmful for actors from marginalised communities. Training a critical eye onto mainstream casting practices, Smith advocates for a decolonisation of normative

casting that redistributes the power held over the continual (re) working of identity; she proposes several contingent strategies drawn from mid-twentieth century radical or advocacy theatre groups that indicate different resistant ways to labour. Smith and Oh each trace connections between an actor's performance work and (the casting agent's assumptions about) their character's staged labour, thereby drawing out the interdependencies between wage relations and the production of subjectivity.

This focus on the relationship between labour and the productions of subjectivity shows not only that many forms of contemporary work invite a theatrical frame and benefit from an analysis based in acting and performance theory, but also that theatre's investment in 'identity work' often brings it in close proximity to corporate interests and a (self-)exploitation—both on stage and off.

### **Performance and Book Reviews**

The performance responses for this edition of *Platform* come at a time when the notion of watching theatre (whether for professional purposes or otherwise) is under great strain as the ability for audiences to be in close proximity to the live and labouring bodies of performers has been necessarily lacking. However, the two performances responded to in this issue playfully and inventively overcome these challenges while effectively integrating the contemporary lived experiences of the performers and their audiences. Olivia Lamont Bishop's response to Action Hero's *Oh Europa* (2018-present) reveals how the piece redefines standardised notions of proximity in a context of personal isolation and political insularity. Heidi Liedke's experience of Creation and Big Telly's *Alice – A Virtual Theme Park* (2020) depicts theatre that mobilises the lived situation of the 'locked-down audience' as necessary to the performance's construction.

Meanwhile, our two book reviews highlight studies on theatres of labour that directly contribute to political and cultural advancements and transgressions rather than economic ends. Satkirti Sinha's review of Brahma Prakash's book, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualising the Folk*

*Performance in India* (2019), highlights how Indian folk performances assist in the preservation of lower Hinduist castes. Alessandro Simari reviews Mary McAvoy's research on American labour college drama programmes presented in her monograph, *Rehearsing Revolutions: The Labor Drama Experiment and the Radical Activism in the Early Twentieth Century* (2019). These four responses and reviews showcase how the labours of theatre makers and audiences have proved to be, and often remain, at their most affirmative and vital in situations of crisis.

As the contributions of this issue discuss working practices across some of the Western world (the UK, Europe, Australasia, and the US), this issue contains a variety of analyses and opinions about (artistic) labour politics and practices. And while many of the realities described are universal within these different institutional and cultural contexts, there are, indeed, particular variations and discrepancies between certain historical and economic developments. And as such, we have tried to contextualise these cultural specificities wherever possible. We hope the range of topics enables engaging insights into the state of today's multiple 'Theatres of Labour'.

We are grateful to the Department of Drama, Theatre, and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London, for the continued financial and academic support. We want to thank our contributors, interviewees, peer reviewers, and copy editors, who completed the bulk of the work for this issue during the abnormal and unusual circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unprecedented halt to the entertainment industry, and the social and political unrest happening in many Western countries. We value the time and effort you have put into this exciting issue of *Platform*, and, of course, we appreciate your work!

- Meg Cunningham and Clio Unger, Editors

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## *Notes on Contributors*

**Steyn Bergs** is an art critic and a researcher in art history. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, where he is finalizing a dissertation titled *Control Copy: Digital Reproducibility and the Commodification of Contemporary Art*. From 2016 to 2018, he was co-editor-in-chief of *Kunstlicht*, a journal for art and the humanities.

**Olivia Lamont Bishop** is a PhD candidate at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research addresses the representation of place in relation to conflict, migration and displacement in performance in the UK. She is also a theatre maker and dramaturg, as well as the Project Coordinator for the Migrant Dramaturgies Network.

**Jaswinder Blackwell-Pal** is a PhD candidate in Arts and Humanities at Birkbeck, University of London. She is also an associate lecturer in the department of English, Theatre and Creative Writing and the department of Management, also at Birkbeck. Her interdisciplinary research explores the intersections between actor training, theatre history, and trends in contemporary work.

**Tim Cowbury** is a theatre-maker, writer, and teacher. As co-founder of contemporary performance company Made In China, he has created acclaimed works performed across the UK and internationally. His playwriting has been staged at venues including Young Vic, Crucible Theatre and Royal Exchange Theatre, and is published by Oberon Books. Tim teaches in community and education settings across the UK and is currently working on his *Techne* AHRC funded PhD into the politics of alternative theatre at Royal Holloway University of London.

**Meg Cunningham** is currently completing her doctorate at the University of Surrey. Her practice-based PhD explores the intersections between architectural environments, story, and immersive scenography. Holding a Bachelors of Architecture and an MFA in Scenic Design, she has worked in Los Angeles as a designer and art director for the themed entertainment industry (theme parks and attractions). Meg has also designed in a variety of theatres in London, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles. Meg is a lecturer of scenography at Middlesex University.

**Laura Kressly** is a theatre critic and dramaturg. She founded The Play's the Thing UK in 2015, co-founded the Network of Independent Critics



in 2016, and was a fellow of the National Critics Institute at Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in 2017. Bylines: Exeunt, Fest, The British Council Blog, The Skinny, Wales Arts Review, The Shakespeare Standard and Show-score. Recent dramaturgy credits: Blue Elephant Theatre, Camden Fringe, and CPT.

**Heidi Łucja Liedke** is Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany. In her postdoctoral project, she examines the aesthetics of live theatre broadcasting and how it oscillates between the poles of spectacle, materiality, and engagement. She completed her PhD in 2016 at the University of Freiburg which became her monograph *The Experience of Idling in Victorian Travel Texts, 1850-1901* (2018). Recent articles have dealt with quasi-experts in the context of livecast theatre, live broadcast spectators, and notions of dis/comfort in contemporary theatre.

**Shona Macnaughton** is an artist based in Glasgow. She makes live performances about how artistic labour, paid labour and the mother role intersect with the art institution and its working conditions. Her practice has been made public internationally via exhibitions, performances, talks and writing. Her work is currently on display at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh as part of NOW 6.

**Laurel V. McLaughlin** is a curator and PhD Candidate in the History of Art at Bryn Mawr College. She currently holds a 2020–2021 Luce/ACLS Dissertation Fellowship in American Art and her dissertation focuses on migratory aesthetics in performance art staged in the U.S. by womxn-identifying practitioners, 1970–2016.

**Leah Modigliani** is an artist and scholar whose interests include the history of the avant-garde and its relationship to political critique, conceptual art, social dissent since 1968, and feminist politics of visual representation and discourse. She is Associate Professor of Visual Studies at Tyler School of Art and Architecture.

**Hansol Oh** is a writer, translator, and a Ph.D candidate in Theatre and Performance at the CUNY Graduate Center. In her research project she examines how labor is spectacularized in contemporary US American theatre in the context of neoliberalization. Her academic and critical essays have appeared in *Theatre and Performance Design* and Exeunt Magazine NYC.

**Raimund Rosarius** teaches theatre studies at the University of Munich, and dance studies at the University of Salzburg. He graduated from the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing with an MA in Theory and Practice of Directing and holds a BA in Theatre, Film, and Media Studies from the University of Vienna. In addition to his research, he has been working as a director, actor, performance artist, author, translator, and curator.

**Angeliki Roussou** is an art historian (PhD, Edinburgh College of Art) researching issues of institutionality in global artistic and curatorial contexts. She has published the chapter 'Instituting and the Discursive: Theorizing 'Former West'' in *Putting Theory into Practice in the Contemporary Classroom* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) and reviewed exhibitions for *MAP Magazine* and *South as a State of Mind*. She has previously worked as a curator in Athens, Greece.

**Alessandro Simari** recently completed his doctoral studies at Queen Mary, University of London. His research has focused on the inter/cultural and spatial politics of performance in 'reconstructed' early modern theatres, with other interests including theatre architecture, the appeal of Elizabethanism to later radical theatre practitioners, and twentieth-century European theatre history. He is a co-editor of and contributor to a special issue of *Shakespeare Bulletin* on 'Labor in Contemporary Shakespeare Performance'. His writing has also appeared in *Cahiers Élisabéthains* and *Theatre Survey*.

**Satkirti Sinha** is a folk theatre practitioner and researcher who has performed and presented internationally. He has recently completed an MA at Royal Holloway, University of London and his interests include practice-based intercultural works. He is currently working on a performance of Bhikhari Thakur's *Bidesiya* (1917).

**Kirstin Smith** is a Lecturer in Drama at the University of East Anglia. She began working life as an actor. Kirstin's doctorate addressed the history of stunts in public life. *Stunts of Late Nineteenth Century New York: Aestheticised Precarity, Endangered Liveness* was nominated for the 2019 George Fredley Memorial Award.

**Antonia Tretter** is a dramaturge and PhD candidate, based in Berlin. She studied Dramaturgy (MA), Theatre, Literature and Culture (BA) in Munich and Canterbury. Antonia worked in numerous contexts as

director's assistant, dramaturge and lecturer in Munich and Würzburg. Since autumn 2019 she receives a PhD scholarship by Evangelisches Studienwerk Villigst. In her dissertation (Prof. Dr. David Roesner, LMU Munich) she examines the political dimensions of dramaturgical praxis.

**Clio Unger** is a PhD candidate at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, London, where she works on lecture performances and the knowledge economy. She holds an MA in theatre and performance studies from The Graduate Center (CUNY) and an MA in dramaturgy from the University of Munich. Clio is the editorial assistant for *Contemporary Theatre Review*. Her research has been published in the *International Journal for Performance Art and Digital Media* and in *Design Studies*.

**Alex Watson** is a department-funded PhD researcher and VL/GTA at Royal Holloway. His thesis explores 2010s British theatre with a specific focus on the concepts, representations, and utilisations of violence and performativity; areas of interest in his research therefore include issues of protest, environmental damage, neoliberalism, European-British identit(ies), and gendered and racial violence. He has performed in two site-based performances for the BBC and has contributed to the Methuen Engage title *Harold Pinter: Stages, Networks, Collaborations* (2021). He holds an MA from Kings College London.

**Beth M. Weinstein**, PhD, is an architect and Associate Professor at the University of Arizona. Moving between architectural and performative research and practice, she creates performance-installations inviting publics to make sense of critical issues such as climate catastrophe and species extinction, invisible labour and spaces that invisibilize, protest and public space. She currently is writing a book titled *Architecture + Choreography: Collaborations in Dance, Space and Time*.

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## *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.<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> 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*.<sup>2</sup> 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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<sup>2</sup> 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-working 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 (à 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 working 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”<sup>3</sup> 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 *activism*) 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 événements” 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).<sup>4</sup>

Research into contemporary cultural policy in the UK deepens

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<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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”, *industriousness* 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).<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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),<sup>8</sup> 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 *working*, 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).<sup>9</sup> These competitive sections were interspersed with longer texts and synchronised dances involving all three performers. Amounting to

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<sup>9</sup> 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 inanelly 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 cyclicity 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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## On Being Cast: Identity Work

By Kirstin Smith

### Abstract

This article examines the relationship between being cast and identity, arguing that casting not only functions as an index of identity in a given context, but also reveals quotidian identity work. I analyse Zawe Ashton's *Character Breakdown*, framing it as an example of an actor's effort to decolonise casting (in a British context). Drawing on Judith Butler and Randy Martin, I define identity work as negotiating between value abstractions, social discipline and intimate corporeality. *Character Breakdown* depicts a search for different ways to cite identity and thereby different ways to labour. I explore how an actor materialises in being cast, the surrogation involved in identity work, and the possibilities that resistant casting practices have held for reconstituting that work. I contextualise the portrayal of present-day casting in *Character Breakdown* with archival sources documenting the history of casting and being cast in the United Kingdom. Casting in the present is portrayed as both haunted by repertory typologies and engaged in new, still limiting forms of stratification.

### 1. Being Cast

A peculiar condition of being an actor is that representations constitute material, working conditions. Being cast is a heightened experience of identity formation in relation to representations, in which self-commodification and abstraction coexist with embodied knowledge and intimate social- and self-relation. Just as bodies are abstracted into types and representations, the 'strangeness [...] the thingness, the quiddity even, of the body' (30)—in Kyla Wazana Tompkin's words—is brought to the fore. To use Judith Butler's description of corporeality, in the casting process, an actor's body materialises as 'a phenomenon in the world, an estrangement from the very 'I' who claims it' (105).

Zawe Ashton's *Character Breakdown* (2019) offers a complex portrayal of acting labour. In a combination of autobiography and fictionalised autobiography, a series of scripted scenes featuring

'Actress'—a woman similar to Ashton, but 'suffering from a disassociative malady'—are interspersed with Ashton's own memories (164). The scenes depict Actress (not Ashton, but not-not Ashton), often alone and on the telephone, trying to present herself to others as she becomes preoccupied with her diminishing sense of self. Ashton's memories, written in prose, each begin with an age, associated character breakdown, and casting notes, eroding the distinctions between personal experiences and acting roles. Her recollections include: hearing about a Black boy around her age turned away from an audition for the Milky Bar Kid; a sexually-threatening encounter with a producer masked as an impromptu audition; negotiating a nudity clause; and a conversation with a director about the director's implicit racism towards her during rehearsals. *Character Breakdown* depicts the self-commodification required of Ashton/Actress, the emotional work of performing the role of Actress, the exhaustion of embodying racist and sexist representations (contextualised by other quotidian racism and sexism), and a sustained search for different ways to undertake acting labour. I characterise all this as the work of *being cast*.

Brian Herrera describes casting as a form of 'cultural documentation', which reveals how subjects are racialised, sexualised and gendered in a given context (*Latin Numbers* 57). Casting offers an index to the representation of identity, indicating how bodies signify on stage and screen in particular cultures. As aspects of bodies are rendered signs, casting unavoidably 'concerns the objectification of bodies' (437), as Ashley Thorpe writes. Being cast reveals not only identity, but also—seen from the perspective of an actor—the everyday *work* of identity. I am conscious that connecting work to identity adds complication to an already vague, capacious concept. Therefore, three competing aspects of identity are important here. As Randy Martin notes, first, identity is a value abstraction which facilitates circulation: 'What we call identity is certainly an attribute of self that gets bundled, valued, and circulated beyond an individual person' (64). In casting, identity functions as a mechanism of commodification. Second, I understand identity in Butler's terms: as a form of social discipline. Butler theorised gender as

a 'regulatory schema' or 'historically revisable criteria of intelligibility' which is continually cited in social acts (xxii). In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler's psychoanalytic discourse deploys 'identification' rather than identity (xiii). Through 'identificatory processes', norms are 'assumed or appropriated', enabling the 'formation of a subject' (xxiv). Butler poses:

identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitation [...] they are the sedimentation of the "we" in the constitution of any "I" (68)

Rather than a stable and individuated condition, identity binds us through projection and attachments to others. Third, Butler argues that identity can also be cited differently, as a resistant practice. When a subject finds resistant ways in which to cite an aspect of their identity and hence alter their subjectivity, Butler argues 'the 'I' who would oppose its construction is always in some sense drawing from that construction to articulate its opposition' (83). However, this does not render such resistance 'reducible' to the norm it opposes (*ibid.*).

Identity work, as I frame it, lies in negotiating unstable connections between value abstraction, social discipline, and intimate experiences of corporeality. It is not strictly the labour of acting but is an unavoidable part of the work of being an actor. *Character Breakdown* intimates that being cast heightens and reveals quotidian identity work. Where the book's search for stable subjectivity could emphasise individual psychology, it instead persistently reaches beyond Ashton; its mesh of fictions and quotidian performativity increasingly incorporate other bodies. Paralleling Butler's 'cross-corporeal cohabitation', Ashton depicts the surrogation involved in performance, whereby—in Joseph Roach's theorisation—performers might become 'effigies' (36). Roach suggests that effigies hold open a place in memory, allowing a collective to remember (and forget) the dead and the past. The memories that casting maintains, I contend, are of how bodies are expected to materialise and make meaning.

As Ashton/Actress seek to liberate themselves from being cast, they fantasise resistant ways of working and embodying identity. I read *Character Breakdown* as an example of an actor seeking to decolonise casting, and I contextualise Ashton's effort by using rare archival sources which document experiences of casting and being cast in the United Kingdom.

The history of casting is seldom documented. As Herrera notes, 'Casting's iterative impact lends it a peculiar ephemerality' ('The Best Actor' 1). Only the end result of casting tends to be visible in archives, press releases, or programmes.<sup>1</sup> Casting has historically been undervalued as labour, often undertaken by women in roles which bridged administrative and creative work.<sup>2</sup> Casting directors have recently begun to be recognised in industry awards,<sup>3</sup> yet the characterisation of their work as subsidiary to a directorial vision has left a missing history and allowed casting, in Herrera's words, to 'largely elud[e] historical and theoretical inquiry' ('The Best Actor' 1).

Casting has come to scholarly attention in the last two decades, predominantly in the United States. Ayanna Thompson, Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Angela Pao, and Herrera have problematised the dominant transformational paradigms which emerged in the mid-twentieth century in relation to race: 'non-traditional' and 'color-blind' casting, as well as revealing histories of (mis)representations of Latinx, African-American, and Asian people (see Thompson *Colorblind*; Thompson

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1 The Old Vic archive, for example, holds CVs and headshots for those actors who were hired, kept by the publicity department in order to write press releases.

2 Two of the first women to make their names as casting directors in the U.K. and thereby create the role—Annie Wigzell at National Theatre and Gillian Diamond at the Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal Court—have left little to no trace in the company archives. Diamond, who was reportedly a 'close confidante' of RSC artistic director Peter Hall (Coveny 2015), goes unmentioned in his autobiography, though is briefly mentioned in his diaries (Hall 51, 85, 190, 243).

3 Awards for casting directors were introduced by the Australian Film and TV Academy in 2018 and British Association for Film and Television in 2020.

*Passing Strange*; Wilkins Catanese; Pao). In the UK, controversy concerning the casting of the Royal Shakespeare Company's *The Orphan of Zhao* in 2012 led to scholarship by Amanda Rogers, Ashley Thorpe, Broderick Chow and others. A significant strand of research has stemmed from work with undergraduates and young people.<sup>4</sup> These scholars have interrogated the ethics of identity representation and embodiment in terms of class and race, brought into strong relief in education and training, and recounted efforts to—as I characterise it in this article—decolonise casting.

Through *Character Breakdown* and archival fragments, I analyse how an actor materialises in being cast, the surrogation involved in identity work, and the possibilities that resistant casting practices have held for reconstituting that work.

## 2. An Actor Appears

An actor's appearance in casting has historically been structured by categories which facilitate a system of training and employment. These categories act as 'cultural documentation', conveying what constitutes identity in context. In *Character's Theatre*, for example, Lisa Freeman reveals how identity was codified in eighteenth-century casting, arguing that while 'the subject' was irrelevant to the era's genre-driven theatre, a 'dynamic paradigm for representing identity' is detectable (7).

Being cast is a process of materialising through such culturally and historically contingent stratification. Ashton explains: 'Graduate actors need photographs [...] To show your 'type'. Not so much *who you are* but *you could be*' (101). *Character Breakdown* frames an actor's

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4 Building on an Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference panel in 2016, Claire Syler and Daniel Banks created *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative*. They framed casting as 'inherently a political act' and sought to mobilise a 'social movement' embracing 'access and representation' (23 and 26). Syler and Anna Chen analysed the relationship between casting and 'undergraduates' emerging racial-ethnic identity development' (*Casting a Movement* 5). Comparably, in the U.K., Katie Beswick viewed casting through the prism of a National Youth Theatre 'social inclusion actor training' project and its representations of class and race.



materialisation entirely visually, in contrast to early usage of ‘audition’ as a ‘voice trial’ (Anon. *Questions and Answers* 187). Actress auditions for the role of a doctor in a sci-fi drama, described by her agent as a ‘come-back vehicle’ for an actor who has been cleared of ‘allegations’ (13). Actress is invited to a screen test and asked to wear something ‘to the body’. The casting director explains:

CASTING DIRECTOR We need to *see* you, they need to be able to see you.

ACTRESS *See* me?

CASTING DIRECTOR Producers, the director, they’re tired, they want to be able to go –yep, there’s our girl. [...] Before you’ve opened your mouth. (26)

Actress’s second screen test doubles as a ‘chemistry’ test with male actor, Mikey (90). Apparently more intimate with the creative team, Mikey takes one of Actress’ lines and kisses her without warning, afterwards explaining he was ‘trying something’ (98). Unbeknownst to Ashton, the doctor’s scientific dialogue has been removed. She later hears that they have cast Mikey but not her: ‘maybe your hair is a little short—a little on the edgy side for them’, her agent suggests, rooting Actress’s rejection in a racialised aspect of her body (127).

*Character Breakdown* portrays contemporary mainstream casting as simultaneously haunted by twentieth-century British repertory-influenced frameworks, and engaged in new, but still limiting, forms of stratification. In the mid-twentieth century, repertory theatre split actors by gender and then organised them into ‘juveniles’ or ‘ingenues’ (if female), ‘leads,’ and ‘characters’. Heteronormative and hierarchical, it conceptualised identity as a series of co-dependent states, corresponding to stages of life, appearance, and bearing. Within those pathways, repertory theatre was often lauded as rigorous actor training which offered the possibility of virtuosity to all.<sup>5</sup>

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5 An Old Vic Theatre memorandum reads: ‘On the acting side, it develops versatility and style in actors by creating variety of opportunity, both in rehearsal and study, and in playing experience’ (*The Old Vic Theatre Company*).

In reality, access to virtuosity was limited. In 1967, Equity's Afro-Asian Artists' Committee reported: 'The number of opportunities for qualified coloured ex-students to go on to what is considered by many actors to be the most valuable post-graduate training an actor can have, in the repertory theatre' was 'infinitesimal' (Anon. *Equity Letter* 3). In combination with standard theatre repertoire, repertory theatre casting reproduced unquestioningly well-established pairings of embodied signifier and signified. This is exemplified in semi-legible and cryptic audition notes left by John Moody, who ran the Bristol Old Vic repertory company in the late 1950s. The physical appraisal associated with casting is evidenced in this smattering of observations and judgments: 'Old. Toupee'; 'Very short'; 'good-looking'; 'good heavy type'; 'No'; 'dark'; 'big, slow'; 'red hair'; 'heavy built'; 'Jewish looking'; 'Blond. Not bad looks'; 'Bad eyes'; 'one eye'; 'No. Pansy' ('pansy' appears twice; 'cissie' several times); 'silly parts' (referring to a woman who had previously played a maid) (JM/2). The stratification of repertory theatre layered onto many other readings of physical appearance relating to class, gender, race and ethnicity, disability, age, size, and sexuality, among other things. Speaking in the 1980s, actor Maggie Steed described her training twenty years previously:

They taught us to walk and to speak and we all tried to be 'good' actors. [...] It was all very reactionary and patriarchal [...]. The few who had a working-class background played maids and, if they were lucky, Mistress Quickly. (62-65)

Drama school and repertory theatre are presented by Steed as a training in re-presenting one's place in a social hierarchy. Perceiving her own body through an objectifying lens, she implies, was alienating work, which functioned to root lack of opportunity in the body.

Citations of repertory types in *Character Breakdown* suggest that they still haunt present-day casting. Actress bumps into Older Actress, who has just finished filming a programme in which her character was raped, strangled, and left in a ditch. 'Classic,' Older Actress remarks,

before describing being cast in terms that parallel the role's violence: '[t]urning thirty felt like being dead, work-wise, and having the kid was the final nail in the coffin. [...] You're not an ingénue and you're not a grandma, so – see ya!' (191) This zombie typology lies just under the surface of the present-day types identified by Ashton. At sixteen Ashton is suddenly 'too old for the parts I'm used to—tearaway daughter, street urchin, babysitter with a drug habit. But still too young for trainee policewoman and supply teacher with attitude' (80). In a long list of types, Ashton critiques the familiar roles generally available to young women of colour:

sassy Puerto Rican girls with one line in American house-party scenes/ Mexican younger sisters trying to get their brothers to leave street gangs [...] all the delineations of the African diaspora with non-speaking roles/ sassy girls who run their own salons/ the drug mule who goes down for life/ the convict surviving to tell her story. (150-151)

Ashton's memories mirror Actress's sci-fi audition experience. In one audition, a director tells her 'time is money' before yelling throughout her monologue about being abused as his silent colleagues look on: 'Get into that *place*, come on!' (260). On another occasion, having just come off stage, Ashton is approached by a man:

When I play it back in my head, it sounds like the opening dialogue from an eighties porn film. He tells me he is an executive producer on a film that has just lost its lead actress. He needs a replacement, someone with star quality. For the right girl, this could be a huge break. (118)

Like the repertory categories, the producer's dialogue seems to come from another era, haunting the present. On the street, they enter into a scenario in which he plays her abusive boyfriend. He kisses her, cajoling: '[p]lay, come on' (119). The improvised scene culminates in a moment of genuine fear for Ashton, in which 'his eyes glaze over like a shark before an attack' (121). The threat dissipates without violence, but

he takes no professional information on leaving.

Such experiences of abuse sit alongside a broader critique of parallels between exoticising and generalising conceptions of race and gender in many casting call-outs and the daily experiences of Ashton/Actress. A stylist suggests that Ashton wear a ‘nude’ dress for a red-carpet occasion (206). A man with whom Actress has a one-night stand tells her: ‘[y]our skin. [...] It’s like caramel, like honey dripping straight from the comb’ (200). In a publicity interview, a journalist repeatedly asks Actress where she is from. A white, female director complains that Ashton is ‘aggressive’ in ways she cannot elaborate (247). Being cast comes to stand in for the many ways in which Ashton/Actress are forced to cite or resist a social interaction which inscribes their exclusion, exoticisation, or misrepresentation—for race and gender as social discipline.

### **3. Surrogation and Identity Work**

An actor’s manifestation in casting, then, is interspersed with the broader abstraction entailed by identity. As Butler notes, such abstraction is both bodily and removed from the individual. Performance holds in tension repeatability and uniqueness, and casting filters this tension through a person. Being cast usually underlines the fungible quality of the actor, as auditions express a multitude of possible, similar representations. On the other hand, rhetoric concerning casting frames actors as unique talents, possessing inimitable qualities. The predatory producer tells Ashton he ‘just has such a good feeling about [her] being *the one*’ (118, emphasis original). Here, casting heightens a quality of professionalised labour, whereby workers are and must be replaceable, yet doing a job well involves a fantasy of irreplaceability, which Roach describes as ‘spurious immortality’ (2). Casting processes seem to transcend identity even as they perform it, promising that individuals can supersede the abstracting categories which structure their appearance.

*Character Breakdown*’s sustained exploration of bodies makes clear that identity work involves the subject but is not rooted in the

subject. Conversely, it rests on grossly unequal collaborations and exploitation. In a comment on the racist undertones of the concept of acting 'range', Ashton realises that she needs long hair to make her more castable: 'Versality is apparently just—long hair' (150). While Ashton shops for wigs, the shopkeeper offers her a weave, promising the hair is '[a]ll ethical'. She buys one with a sense of trepidation: 'I imagine this woman, the woman whose hair I have against my face. [...] *Did* she give it willingly? It *is* a perfect match. I can't think about this any more. I pay for it, whispering a small prayer' (152).

Soon after the hair is woven in, Ashton gains a leading role in a project she respects. While filming, a make-up artist confuses her by offering to cover her greys. Ashton realises that the weave is going grey at the root, marking the corporeal presence of the woman to whom it belonged: '[i]s she using me as a host? [...] Traumatized by hair theft? [...] I can *feel* them. All day. The more I bring the character to life, the more the hair lives – on me' (155). Ashton fantasises about finding the woman, returning the hair and seeking forgiveness. The experience implicates Ashton in a fragmented, multifaceted identity—part fiction, part brutal reality—breached across global iniquity and written on bodies and body parts.

In an inversion of this event, Actress complains to her father that her own hair is not hers, but rather dictated by the demands of industry and character: 'it's MINE. It's just not – mine. It belongs to another woman, I'm just looking after it for her until the next one comes along' (149). The condition Actress describes is not only the presence of characters that she has played in her body, but rather the presence of other women in a mesh of appearance and representation which goes beyond her. Fragmented surrogates substitute for one another, wittingly and unwittingly, in layers of exploitation. The unevenly distributed work of identity requires that 'attribute[s] of self' are 'bundled, valued, and circulated beyond an individual person', as Martin writes (64). Experiences of embodying types, of being cast, affords the knowledge that such work is shared, though workers are profoundly alienated from one another in highly exploitative and competitive relationships.

Offered a body double for a nude scene, Ashton is torn between a desire to liberate her own imperfect nakedness from the constraints of appearance on screen and contemplation of a fantasised woman, Wanda, who would represent her body: 'I'm objectifying every inch of her in my mind. TV has made me hate myself' (196). Ashton fantasises a situation in which Wanda suddenly claims agency, looks into the camera, calls cut and disrobes Ashton, '[d]emanding I be allowed to represent my own body, my own skin!' (197) The fantasy neatly ties together Wanda and Ashton's exploitation, but its hyperbolic terms imply Ashton's awareness of her own potential role in exploiting Wanda. When her agent suggests she could have approval over casting of the double, Ashton recoils and agrees to perform naked herself.

Ashton closely identifies with a fantasised body double (Wanda) and the woman who sold her hair. Both trouble what constitutes Ashton's labour because to differing degrees they seem to, or in fact do, fragment and sell the body. In being cast, the body's objectification and commodification vie with an actor's labour as the potential source of value.

#### **4. Decolonise Casting**

*Character Breakdown's* depiction of being cast demonstrates a pressing need to decolonise casting in the present. Actress's search for liberation initially results in her giving up acting, refusing both to work under exploitative conditions and to signify in the ways demanded of her. Actress nonetheless tentatively agrees to meet a female producer with whose work she is familiar. Producer announces the meeting is not an audition; the part is Actress's if she wants. She shows Actress a memento she has kept from her own acting career: a typically reductive character breakdown for the part of a non-speaking woman, who appears having sex and then dead on a mortuary slab. The insight Producer has gained into being cast structures how she now casts, reducing the power imbalance and refusing exploitative repertoire. These mitigations enable Actress to resume the labour of acting—at least for this project.

This single instance of a slightly more equitable casting experience uses strategies developed by the radical companies who first resisted repertory casting modes in the mid-to-late twentieth century. In this final section, I draw from company archives and Equity Letters to highlight practices of resistance in casting, which still have the potential to change casting now.

Casting became a focal point for a regime of normative representation, which included limited dramatic repertoire, the objectifying gaze of racist, sexist, homophobic, and ableist perception on stage and off, and the authority of a director. Working collaboratively, practitioners sought decolonisation—or refuge from the normative regime—in three casting strategies: alignment between an actor's identity and that represented; separation of skills and identity; and casting as a metonymical employment process. Importantly, these three approaches do not add up to a coherent whole: they are contingent strategies for finding resistant ways to labour, rather than a totalising structure which dictates how meaning is attributed to bodies.

First, in an effort to portray under-represented experiences with accuracy, some radical companies sought *alignment* between an actor's identity and embodied knowledge, and that which was represented. An undated handwritten flier for No Boundaries, for example, stipulates that the company sought a lesbian actress (BF/PB/61). Companies such as Gay Sweatshop Women's Company aimed to make performances that were, to quote the programme for *WHAT THE HELL IS SHE DOING HERE?*, 'faithful' and 'truly representative', because they were sourced from their 'own thoughts, feelings and experiences' (Gay Sweatshop Women). This altered the asymmetrical power structure of being cast, because individuals shaped their own roles (creating the possibility that casting could be removed entirely within collaborative groups). The alignment approach enabled an extended focus on the differences within a shared identity, as in Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro*, produced by Theatre of Black Women in 1986. Deployed beyond small-scale companies, alignment-based casting ringfences roles and helps to tackle misconceptions and representational lacunae.

Second, and conversely, the Integrated Casting Proposal of 1967, sought to decolonise casting by *separating* an actor's identity and the assumed identity traits of a role. The proposal called for actors to be cast on the basis of *skills* rather than racial and ethnic identity, conceptualising skill as separable from identity. This strategy depends in part on the idea that skill itself is not a marked concept, which, like 'range', conceals preconceptions about ability in an apparently neutral framework for judgement.<sup>6</sup> It also raises a question implicit in the term 'identity work': are performances of identity aspects of skill? Nonetheless, the skills-based approach enables alternative citations of race and ethnicity, which can be repeated and expanded. The Integrated Casting Proposal took aim at the way that realism was deployed to limit opportunity, mirroring racist expectations beyond theatre. Rather than repeat a societal failure of imagination, theatre should show what could transpire were people being selected for social roles—in a metaphorical sense 'cast'—without racial prejudice. Integrated casting was intended to 'anticipate' and 'perhaps accelerate' an increase in employment opportunities more broadly (*Anon. Equity Letter* 4).

Concurrently, many of the women who formed feminist theatre companies in the 1970s and '80s focused on casting as a locus for concerns regarding *employment* in the performing arts. Gillian Hanna described Monstrous Regiment's commitment to 'jobs for women technicians, writers and directors' as well as 'good stage-parts for women' (46). Her statement contextualises casting among other employment decisions in theatre; its political value lay in it being a spectacularised instance of work distribution. This suggests that casting alone was insufficient for tackling a regime of normative perception: repertoire, training, and institutional working practices were all implicated in fighting for representational and employment justice.

These three approaches demand different kinds of identity work from an actor. Alignment centres aspects of identity, while separation

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6 David R. Roediger, for example, documents the role that skill played in emerging conceptions of the 'white worker' in the U.S.



de-centres them. The employment approach views the actor as a worker among workers, in the company and in wider society. Seen together, the three strategies usefully metamorphose and diffuse identity work, enabling resistance to the citations of identity demanded in mainstream casting of the moment. Several potential points of resistance in being cast come through: refusing acting labour itself; resisting the asymmetrical power structure of casting through collaboration; resisting realism when it amounts to identity as discipline; resisting unreflective conflation of identity and ability; and foregrounding labour through casting. Whereas being cast alienates actors from themselves and those who share their identity work, decolonising casting necessitates a redistribution of power and alliances between those ordinarily estranged. In place of identity work which demands that fragmented surrogates substitute for one another, wittingly and unwittingly, in layers of exploitation, decolonised casting offers explicit surrogation, foregrounding the mutual connections inherent in identity.

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## **Craft Remodelling Labour? The Craft Metaphor in Actor Training and the Actor's Future Labour**

A case study of foundational training at *Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts* in Berlin

By Raimund Rosarius

### **Abstract**

Within the institutional ecologies of actor training the metaphor that *acting is craft* is ubiquitous while in theatre studies it has—probably due to its studiously vague nature—hardly been addressed at all. In the wider context of performative arts Jen Harvie adapts Richard Sennett's conceptual craftsmanship as a means to redefine labour within neoliberal capitalism. Calvin Taylor rethinks performer training as a place to resist the instrumentalization of education as vocational training for the social factory. With those two trains of thought in mind, I argue that actor training's unique craft metaphor might transform the student-actors' future labour in a way that they will potentially resist neoliberal capitalism's monopolization of labour. This essay's argument is built upon my 2018 and 2019 field research at the *Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts* in Berlin in correspondence with relevant training literature. I observed that the academy's foundational training (*Grundlagenunterricht*), in particular, is a place of holistic education within actor training. It equips student-actors with a craftful resistance against the exploitation of their future labour. This essay concludes that the craft metaphor in foundational training is a promising basis to start a strategic rethinking of actor labour critical of neoliberal capitalism.

A conundrum for starters: '45 percent diligence', '45 percent discipline', '10 percent talent'<sup>1</sup>—which field would match this distribution of labour? As a field that emphasizes a nuanced willingness and deems predisposition negligible, one might think of skilled trades rather than of creative industries. Idiosyncrasies left aside, the arts are even less likely to be associated with negligible talent or excessive discipline. Still, this percentage distribution stressed like a mantra by former actor trainer

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1 '45 Prozent Fleiß, 45 Prozent Disziplin und 10 Prozent Talent.' All translations from German sources were done by the author.

Veronika Drogi refers to acting (Schuler and Harrer 21). Her students and successors, Margarete Schuler and Stephanie Harrer, at the *Ernst Busch Academy of Dramatic Arts* in Berlin, depict the student-actor like an apprentice carpenter who has to focus on the same procedures over and over again. They most familiarize themselves with the material and tools in a lengthy process so that ‘with each newly learned procedure, the apprentice’s labour [is] professionalized’ (12). Therefore, is acting more like carpentry than art?

*Acting is (a) craft* might be the most frequently employed metaphor in actor training.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true for *Ernst Busch*. Most authors who invest in this theatre academy as a case study stumble upon the frequent usage of the word ‘craft’ there. Writing from an English-speaking perspective, Steve Earnest includes its German translation:

‘[w]hile theoretical viewpoints do occasionally creep in, the focus of the training is clearly on *Handwerk* or the craft elements in acting. Therefore, acting, movement, and voice classes constitute the bulk of the training program’ (38).

The word *Handwerk* became a common refrain during Earnest’s stay at *Ernst Busch* from 1992-1994. Almost 30 years later, during my fieldwork at the academy from 2018-2019, I found the same. Earnest saw the teachers’ opposition to theory and their focus on the technical aspects of acting as the reason for this emphasis on craft. For Anja Klöck, the focus on craft is indicative of an ideological division between East and West German acting schools, especially in the years after the

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2 In German publications that include anthologies of interviews with actor trainers all sooner or later drop the word *Handwerk* no matter whether it is addressed in the question (such as in Schuler and Harrer) or whether the word is absent from the catalogue of questions (such as in Klöck). In *Anatomy of Performance Training*, John Matthews views performance training through the lens of woodcutting, which further stresses my argument of craft as a dominant metaphor also outside of German-speaking actor training contexts. While Matthews consciously employs *anatomy* as a metaphor (26), he does not investigate why *craft* is frequently referred to within training contexts.

fall of the Berlin Wall. This division pitched the technically skilled East German actor against the West German actor guided by emotionality; this myth naturalises the difference between technical (cool) East and emotional (hot) West German actors (49). Yet, the authors of both exemplary studies do not focus on the usage of the word ‘craft’, but rather employ an intuitive understanding of it. Earnest understands *Handwerk* tautologically as ‘craft elements in acting’ and Klöck uses it as a term synonymous to technique. Based on my research at *Ernst Busch*, I suggest an alternative reading of ‘craft’ in actor training not as a term but as a *metaphor*.

In contrast to carpentry, acting does not belong to the realm of material culture. Although Helmuth Plessner<sup>3</sup> argues that actors operate in the ‘material of their own existence’ (53),<sup>4</sup> a material that works with itself (acting) differs from the human hand’s work with external material (carpentry). But my question is not so much *if* and *to what extent* acting can be called a craft but *why* it is used in the first place. Why do actor trainers employ the craft metaphor? What is the new meaning that is generated by depicting acting as craft and what does it aim at? In order to better understand the connection between both metaphors—and thus actor training’s approach to actor labour—I argue that to call ‘acting a craft’ should irritate just like ‘acting is carpentry’ would.

The metaphor *acting is craft*, I argue, puts a focus on the dimension and quality of labour in material culture and takes it as a paragon for an envisioned actor labour. In this essay, I argue that the craft metaphor can have a transformative impact on the student-actors’ understanding of artistic labour. Drawing on Jen Harvie’s notion of the artepreneur, I show that the craft metaphor—and the understanding of labour that it generates—cannot suit neoliberal capitalism’s needs. Acting craft, as totally out of fashion within institutions that follow artepreneurialism,

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3 Plessner’s essay is a central source for student-actors and instructors at *Ernst Busch*. Even without referencing Plessner, the thought is found in many *Ernst Busch* publications.

4 ‘[...] doch verrät die Darstellung im Material der eigenen Existenz eine Abständigkeit des Menschen zu sich’.

could contrarily *become* a place to resort to within neoliberal capitalism's embracive instrumentalization of (artistic) labour.

Harvie defines 1) 'self-interest and individualism', 2) 'creative destruction as an apparently inevitable by-product of innovation', and 3) 'productivity, permanent growth and profit' as the risks artists face in their 'implicit requirement to model entrepreneurialism' (63). Instead of 'capitulating to neoliberal capitalist risks' (ibid), Harvie urges artists 'to explore how art might better support social democracy's commitment to collective good' (64). As a strategy to counter this conflation of art and neoliberal capitalism, she explicitly suggests 'exploring the value of craftsmanship' (ibid). *Craftsmanship*, which Harvie suggests as an artistic strategy to counter the risks of becoming 'tools of neoliberal capitalist skills training and ideological modelling' (63), is precisely the figure of thought that actor training has long been employing to address actor labour. I found all three risks the artepreneur poses to acting addressed as facets of the craft metaphor, which therefore harbours strategical potential against neoliberal capitalism's appropriation.

While embracing Harvie's urge to employ *craftsmanship* as a strategy, I stress the distinctness of the craft metaphor in actor training. In this essay I trace the interwoven layers of the craft metaphor via a case study of actor training at *Ernst Busch*. I will focus on *Ernst Busch's Grundlagenunterricht*, a first year *acting foundations course* (referred to as *foundational training* in the following) in which the craft metaphor is particularly prominent. Foundational training offers a thorough insight into basic ideologies and methods that the *Ernst Busch* approach to actor training is built upon and shows the central relevance of the craft metaphor within this framework.

### **An Actor Prepares ... for Work**

To understand the interwoven layers of the acting as craft metaphor, it is first crucial to clarify the notion of neoliberal capitalism and actor training's entanglements in it. Harvie states that neoliberal capitalism is synonymous with Sennett's idea of 'new capitalism' (*New Capitalism*). For the worker, new capitalism manifests through 'job insecurity,

unfamiliarity with tasks and colleagues, and deskilling' (*New Capitalism* 46). According to Sennett those economic developments run counter to human nature: '[m]ost people [...] take pride in being good at something specific, and they value the experiences they've lived through' (*New Capitalism* 5; also qtd. Harvie 46). Labour in new capitalism is thus depicted in opposition to human nature whilst also dominating it.

For Calvin Taylor,

[p]erformer training may be a place in which [a critical alternative to the iniquitous conditions of creative work] could be developed by being both *within* the social factory and through performance knowledge being able to critique its routines (193).

This unique potential Taylor assigns to performer training follows an investigation that sees ecologies of the labour market—as well as that of higher education—'drawn ever further into the global mesh of knowledge capitalism' (183); thereby universities emphasise their eagerness to forge students for the neoliberal labour market. Artistic training is at the core of this dilemma with 'the stereotypically non-conformist figure of the avantgarde artistic subjectivity' employed as the forerunner for 'a bohemianised neo-liberal capitalism' (Taylor 182). As Bojana Kunst formulates, 'with the rise of new ways of working (non-material work, affective work, cognitive work), the primary capital sources of value became human language, imagination and creativity' (86). Kunst establishes 'proximity' as a figure of thought that describes art's relationship to capitalism based on 'visible work (labour), performed before the eyes of other people' as the 'core of contemporary work' (140).

With those qualities at the core of their actor training, students are affected by neoliberal capitalism's sourcing in an immediate way. Student-actors might be the champions of *soft skills*, becoming fully fledged emotional labourers perfectly suited for a neoliberal capitalist labour market. Imagine a better desk clerk at a Berlin start-up than a trained actor! Acting alumni as champions of emotional labour could become integral to and exploited in cultural institutions, as well.

My critique is not that student-actors are poached by an external



labour market, but rather they are confronted with a labour market in which public art institutions have embraced the (self-)exploitation of its content-providers. Actor training is deeply immersed in the industry whilst being equipped with an institutionalized distance to be critical of it. Answering Harvie's urge to obstruct the *artrepreneur* through an embracing of craftsmanship and Taylor's thought of performer training as a place of critique within society, I have observed that foundational training at *Ernst Busch* has been—prior to Sennettian craftsmanship (*The Craftsman*)— semi-consciously confronting those issues, especially Harvie's three risks (self-interest, creative destruction, and quantitatively measured productivity) and the exploitation of emotional labour.

### **Acting Foundations at *Ernst Busch***

My explorations of the acting foundations course are based on Schuler and Harrer's actor training monograph *Grundlagen der Schauspielkunst* (*Foundations in the Art of Acting*) in which they communicate the development of foundational training at *Ernst Busch*. My reading of this training literature is grounded in a three-month fieldwork at the end of 2018 when I observed coursework at *Ernst Busch* taught by Schuler.

Like other acting academies in Germany, *Ernst Busch* is a public institution that primarily trains students for a labour market shaped substantially by another set of institutions: publicly funded municipal theatres. Ever since *Ernst Busch's* establishment, they have offered vocational training for the latter. Founded in 1905 by Max Reinhardt as a private acting school (Völker 7), *Ernst Busch* was, along with schools in Weimar and Leipzig, transformed into a public acting school in 1951 (11). In its own image cultivation, the acting academy tries to delineate a tradition that incorporates Reinhardt's legacy which stressed wholesome actor education over actor training (7). His educational goal was to develop 'the human warmth of an actor',<sup>5</sup> stressing 'individual distinctiveness and personality awareness'<sup>6</sup> instead of the 'formally

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<sup>5</sup> 'die menschliche Wärme eines Schauspielers'

<sup>6</sup> 'Eigenart und Persönlichkeitsbewußtsein'

acquired skills<sup>7</sup> (9) of ‘artistic virtuosity [which] can, if necessary, be acquired by the actor in self-study<sup>8</sup> (7). With the school located in East Berlin, the decades of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were formative for its actor training methodology. A *synthesis* between Stanislavski and Brecht came into being which is nowadays perceived as *Ernst Busch’s* own exceptional training system within the variety of methods taught in acting academies worldwide.

Foundational training and its history touch the core of those guiding principles. Initially called *études*, foundational training was developed by Rudolf Penka both as a place for initial experimentations as well as a nucleus of future structured training as it can be observed today (Drogi, qtd. in Klöck 147). The title ‘*Études*’ that had existed at the school before Penka were abandoned because the actor trainers had realized that what they taught was different from the perfection of playing technique in instrumental training (143). While *études* stress technique, foundational training embraces craft. Sticking to Penka’s methodological core, Drogi amended the foundations course continuously from the 1980s to the early 2000s, emphasising the integration of findings from psychology and sociology (Drogi, qtd. in Klöck 144). Schuler and Harrer’s contemporary approach to foundational training is similar to Drogi’s work and therefore maintains an embodied tradition of the Penka-method in *Ernst Busch’s* training practices today.

Before going into performance, the student-actors have to focus on the quality of their labour. Schuler and Harrer outline ‘four stages of development’<sup>9</sup> in actor training which are ‘*unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence and unconscious competence*’<sup>10</sup> (40) in consecutive order. The opening stage of actor training

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7 ‘formal erarbeiteten Fertigkeiten und Fixigkeiten’

8 ‘künstlerische Virtuosität [...] kann sich der Schauspieler notfalls auch allein aneignen’

9 ‘vier Entwicklungsstadien’

10 ‘*unbewusste Inkompetenz, bewusste Inkompetenz, bewusste Kompetenz und unbewusste Kompetenz*’

when ‘unconscious incompetence’ gradually turns into ‘conscious incompetence’, is described as when the ‘hobby evolves into craft, the structure becomes apparent and leads to the ‘workshop’ in which effects are produced’<sup>11</sup> (57). At this stage, a long list of skills that apply to the ‘pure occupation of acting’<sup>12</sup> (12) are trained. The list summarizes 18 basic skills cultivated in foundational training which are e.g. ‘observation’<sup>13</sup>, ‘imagination’<sup>14</sup>, ‘relationship to the [acting] partner’<sup>15</sup>, and ‘recognizing and establishing pivots’<sup>16</sup> (18). These skills do not include movement and speech training or other specialised training elements. The wording for these skills might seem vague but each of them is conceptualised and trained with specific exercises.<sup>17</sup> Consciously employing several of these skills at once—as I have experienced myself in field research—is a highly demanding task of embodied cognition that continuously tests one’s abilities. Actor-students are entrenched in the ‘complexity of the occupation that is acting’<sup>18</sup> (12), so they are increasingly focused on the quality of their labour.

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11 ‘Das Hobby wird zum Handwerk, die Struktur wird sichtbar und führt in die Werkstatt, in der Wirkungen hergestellt werden.’

12 ‘Auseinandersetzung mit der reinen Tätigkeit Schauspielen’

13 ‘Beobachtung: den Blick nach außen zu wenden und die Umwelt genau zu beobachten’

14 ‘Vorstellungskraft’

15 ‘Partnerbeziehung und Partnerspiel’

16 ‘Drehpunkte erkennen bzw. setzen’

17 Many of the terms used in the academy’s actor training until the end of the 1960s were vague and every teacher used them differently. For instance, ‘Stanislawski- and Brecht-vocabulary was wildly jumbled together’ [‘Stanislawski- und Brecht-Vokabeln waren wild gemixt’] (Drogi qtd. in Klöck 144). This problem was solved by theatre scholar Gerhard Piens through a glossary of terms at the end of the 1960s. While one of the craft building methods taught in foundational training used acting terminologies such as *Haltung* (posture in the sense of attitude) with utmost precision, craft itself has kept its studiously vague nature. Because craft was approached as a metaphor instead of a term or terminology, constantly shifting connotations of the word were avoided.

18 ‘Komplexität der Tätigkeit Schauspielen’

Why do actor trainers perceive the word *craft* as an adequate description for this list of 18 competences and skills? For the context of *Ernst Busch*, I would like to stress one element of the craft metaphor that I found strikingly consistent as a guiding thread through foundational training. Schuler and Harrer simply describe an actor's labour in a way that distinguishes it from practices like carpentry whilst putting the two processes of both professions in kinship: in an everyday process, such as crossing a street, many human decisions are made simultaneously, within the fraction of seconds, and mainly go unnoticed. Before a character can cross a street on stage, those many decisions must be analysed and acted out by the actor separately and one after the other (39). Intellectual challenge thus always prefigures feeling in the acting process, even if feeling and thought occur simultaneously or in the opposite order in everyday life. If asked for the gist of acting craft within foundational training, I would refer to an *embodied analytical process* running through all action on stage that has to be learned in its principles, trained with utmost rigor, but continuously evolved throughout the actor's professional career. While the craftsman explores *material* in a process that merges haptics and intellectual challenge, the actor explores *action* merging with emotions and intellect in their body.

What do 90 percent of diligence and discipline have to be invested in? What does the actor apprentice do? One of the very first exercises in foundational training demands the students to observe a passenger on public transport. In class, another student had to enact those observations only following the descriptions given. Usually the enacting student would request more details as the observations were presented in a rather interpretative manner. Interpretative sentences like 'I observed a beggar' helped very little in this process as they reproduce clichés. Precise observations, on the contrary—like the very distinct way in which the person held a bag—were much more convincing. In the following exercise, the students had to speculate on the passenger with equally precise questions addressing living situation, income, last visit to the doctor, etc. It is not hard to see the Brechtian legacy in this stressing of observation with a focus on social realities. Each foundational

training exercise still only trains some aspects of the embodied analytical process. None of the exercises cover all 18 basics skills that are elements of a *well-crafted* action on stage. Such an intense crafting subverts all three risks Harvie mentions: the precision in observation, preparation, and mimesis puts a decided focus on quality rather than on quantity. Students further learn that they have to serve a character and the group through complexity instead of choosing the most innovative character as a means of self-promotion. Instead of seeking innovation, the students must develop an interest for the social reality in everyday life. Quality, therefore, does not refer to conservative aesthetics—an emphasis on technique and skill for its own sake—but a precise location of a character in its materiality.

Championing an autotelic working mode with little profit to be generated from time spent, it becomes obvious that the craftful actor is an endangered species. Acting students do not only have to address social contexts artistically, they are themselves, as much as the training institutions, at the mercy of neoliberal capitalism. With the historical list of prejudices towards the actor's labour long ranging from devil's work to prostitution, from loafing to welfare parasitism, actor training at *Ernst Busch* chooses its own enemy in deciding to use the metaphor of *acting as craft*, and refraining from opposing metaphors like *acting as entrepreneurship*. Yet, this might seem like a counter-intuitive strategy for an acting conservatory to present acting as a learnable skill to groups of students, who were selected via an audition process and arguably scanned for potential (or talent).<sup>19</sup> As the audition process

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19 The audition process at *Ernst Busch*, similar to other acting academies in Germany, requires students to be healthy, between 18 and 25 years of age, have German language skills, and a pay fee of 30 Euros. The first selection rounds are in October to January, on a random Thursday without an alternative date. The second round usually takes place in February (Stegemann 258-262). Whilst the craft of acting can potentially be learned by anyone with the right mindset, the academies only *allow* a small section of the population to learn it. In Germany, it is perfectly possible to study mathematics, philosophy, or theatre studies after retirement for instance, while to learn the craft of acting is only granted for a very short period of one's life, for those with the further prerequisites of near perfect health, language skills, financial liquidity, and availability.

scouts students who have already proven their eagerness and discipline in approaching acting and would follow their passion no matter the cost, the acting conservatory's logic might be closer to the logics of the entrepreneur's internalised self-exploitation. In this sense, the acting as craft metaphor also works to obscure other institutional logics at play, like that of the audition. Self-criticism of *Ernst Busch* as an institution was frequent—not only addressed to me as a researcher but also among colleagues. Most of the actor trainers seemed to be in a love-hate relationship with their institution, its GDR-legacy, and traditionalism. More astonishingly, they all seemed to be convinced of and at peace with its general teaching approach, its craft. This might be due to craft transcending aesthetics (including socially informed aesthetics such as Brecht's) and the preparation of (a well-chosen, small body of) students for an often hostile and exploitative working environment<sup>20</sup>—as I show in the following.

In foundational training, students learn the 'essential acting craft'<sup>21</sup>, which means they are not trained to 'meet fashionable acting styles or the different aesthetic positions which students will encounter in their professional practice'<sup>22</sup>. This 'pure occupation of acting'<sup>23</sup> (Schuler and Harrer 12) students engage with in foundational training is 'a complex, consciously executed occupation, action, activity; the actor's future work occupation and working activity'<sup>24</sup> (11). Craft is 'of more vital significance than any fashion, it transcends tastes and currently

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20 An exhaustive empirical study on the manifold abuses of power in German theatres was presented by Thomas Schmidt in 2019. See works cited for further information.

21 'grundsätzlichen schauspielerischen Handwerk'

22 'Hier geht es erst einmal nicht darum, gerade aktuelle Spielweisen bedienen zu können oder die verschiedenen ästhetischen Positionen, die den Studierenden in ihrer Berufspraxis begegnen werden'

23 'reinen Tätigkeit Schauspielen'

24 'eine komplexe, bewusst auszuführende Tätigkeit, Handlung, Aktivität; die zukünftige Arbeitstätigkeit und Arbeitshandlung des Schauspielers'

fashionable acting styles'<sup>25</sup> (13).

While actor training trains for the labour market, it shows resistance to its demands. Acting craft is not directly applicable to the industry standards—or its current fashions and working style—and may even subvert it. What might appear reactionary to the values of 'creative destruction' (Harvie 63) is a holistic approach to actor labour resisting innovation through the means of destruction alone. On manifold occasions, students were encouraged to stick to their craft and defend their labour in the rehearsal processes, especially in order to resist acting approaches that demand the exploitation of the actor's privacy. Foundational training installs acting craft as an emotional support for their future labour. Students are encouraged to keep a private working diary of their foundational training experience with the purpose to resort to it in particularly difficult working situations and rediscover their craft as a means of self-assurance. Warm-up training also primarily aims at establishing a psycho-physical resort for the acting students' future labour. Warm-up is done collectively in a ritualized form at the start of every foundational training session. Like their diary, the students can come back to their warm-up to establish a distance and new perspective to their everyday labour in professional contexts. For the learned craft to fulfil such a purpose, foundational training must aim to be an empowering experience. In short, craft generates less flexible but more professionalised and resilient actors, even if that means relying on cold technique rather than burn-out.

Annemarie Matzke has pointed out that calling acting labour is joke material in Germany, indicating that acting still lacks legitimation (10-12). This missing legitimation as *honest workers* makes aspiring actors insecure, and thus vulnerable. Having gone through foundational training exercises, the students are instead aware of their work's complexity and its social legitimacy. Although playful exercises form the core of foundational training, a lot of room is given to different forms of

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25 'Hier wird den Studierenden die Grundlage, das Handwerk beigebracht. Die Grundlage ist existenzieller als jede Mode, sie geht über Geschmäcker und gerade aktuelle Spielweisen hinaus.'

discussion that address insecurities. When meta-institutional criticism aiming at foundational training, the academy in general, or the acting industry came up, the discussion continued within the session—at the cost of the exercises. Critical observation, therefore, was not only a tool for the exercises but given precedence. Additionally, professional actors were frequently invited to discuss work realities with the students. One young actor very much stressed his hope that actors might become less ‘thankful’. Being thankful for the chance to do acting at all misses legitimization and forms a close union with manifested self-exploitation. Foundational training aims at perceiving acting as one profession among many—instead of a passion, a dream, a destiny. This helps in building a more resilient working attitude while legitimising acting as a profession, *just like a craft* is instrumental to establishing ‘self-respect and satisfaction for the worker’ (Harvie 97). Accordingly, actors do not only have responsibility for a character, but can also make demands that address their own well-being and that of their colleagues.

Craft, as I was told in foundational training, is also employed as a rhetoric by the actor trainers to invoke professional pride among the students. This makes craft an egalitarianising element for their future labour: ‘[a] self-confident and autonomous acting personality can, through learned craft and constructive communication, meet their colleagues (directors, stage designers, costume designers, dramaturgs, etc.) on the same level and resist them’<sup>26</sup> (Schuler and Harrer 53). Acting craft trains actors to make their voices heard not out of ‘self-interest and individualism’ (Harvie 63) but rather as a ‘constructive and thrusting handling of conflicts’<sup>27</sup> that aims at values like ‘collegiality, respectful interaction with each other, attentive listening and suchlike’<sup>28</sup> (Schuler and Harrer 54). The handling of conflict is practiced in foundational

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26 ‘Eine selbstbewusste und selbstständige schauspielerische Persönlichkeit kann durch erlerntes Handwerk und konstruktive Kommunikation ihren Kollegen (Regisseuren, Bühnenbildnern, Kostümbildnern, Dramaturgen ...) auf Augenhöhe begegnen und ihnen standhalten.’

27 ‘Erlernen eines konstruktiven und offensive Umgangs mit Konflikten.’

28 ‘Kollegialität, respektvoller Umgang miteinander, gegenseitiges Zuhören u.ä.’



training when every single exercise is reflected and criticised by the fellow student-actors. The actor trainer primarily addresses the quality of the student criticism, which should never aim at the person and their privacy, but at the character and the social role.

Instead of a means to forge actors for the industry, acting craft is supposed to be a tower of strength in the student-actors' future labour that does not only enable them to act according to precise observations of their surroundings and allow them to protect themselves from a hostile working environment, but should also empower them to speak up in a 'commitment to collective good' (Harvie 64). This commitment, however, has not yet transcended the boundaries of the institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The holistic concept of actor labour established through the craft metaphor in foundational training transforms the actor into a more resilient craftsperson. Actor training has not yet reached the degree of outward engagement inherent in artwork that 'actively engages qualities of craftsmanship in ways that highlight, variously, its inefficiency, social engagement, social reflexivity and potential egalitarianism' (Harvie 100). Foundational training might nevertheless be the starting point of a more conscious, strategic, and proactive re-thinking of actor labour as a critical epicentre for shaking the neoliberal capitalist mindset materialised in *artepreneurialism* and unleash the full creative potential of the craft metaphor in strengthening civil society.

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## Recalcitrance is Not Yet Resistance: Post-Fordist Labour and Incorporation in the Work of Sofia Caesar

By Steyn Bergs

### Abstract:

This essay examines post-Fordist labour and incorporation in the work of visual artist Sofia Caesar. It focuses particularly on her pieces *Linhas de excesso* (2017) and *Workation* (2019). Incorporation, here, designates both the operations by which bodily movements and gestures are rendered productive of exchange-value and the processes by which this commodification of movement and gesture in turn comes to be embodied by subjects. I argue that Caesar's works dramatize an ambiguity that is crucial to post-Fordist incorporation, in which the body is at once made productive and becomes the site of something that is like a resistance—but should more properly be called a recalcitrance—to its own productivity. Placing some emphasis on Caesar's own performances within these works, as well as on their treatment of media technologies, the paper argues that the incorporated body of the working subject here also appears as an object being worked on. While this ambivalence in the artworks engenders a sense of political impasse (in which it appears as if the working subject can oppose post-Fordist incorporation only at its own expense), I assert that this negativity is to be apprehended as an insistence that things could and should be otherwise.

### Prelude: *Approximations*

'Too close for comfort' means exactly this. For *Canseira*, her 2019 solo exhibition in the Centro Municipal de Arte Hélio Oiticica in Rio de Janeiro, visual artist Sofia Caesar produced a work which addresses the complex legacy of the neo-concretist artist the hosting institution was named after.<sup>1</sup> Caesar's *Approximations (Cosmococas/Offices)* is a series of four diptychs, all of which juxtapose installation shots of Hélio Oiticica's *Cosmococas* with images of contemporary office spaces (see Figure 1). The *Cosmococas* were a series of installations and

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1 *Canseira* ran from 5 October 2019 through 30 November 2019. An untranslatable term, 'canseira' designates an emphatically corporeal sense of weariness and languor.

environments conceived around 1973 by Oiticica in collaboration with Neville D'Almeida and executed on the basis of the authors' instructions by various art institutions after Oiticica's death and subsequent art historical rehabilitation. Like many of Oiticica's works, the *Cosmococas* were meant to nurture and encourage relaxation as well as play and spontaneous, 'free', and non-instrumental movement—all of which were felt by the two artists to challenge, subvert, and undo the rigidifying and alienating disciplinary effects of the imperative of productivity.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting, however, that by 1973 'productivity' was already beginning to designate something quite different from what Oiticica and D'Almeida had in mind. The *Cosmococas* were conceptualised at the onset of a post-Fordist hegemony which the works' authors did not foresee yet prefigured with bizarre and disconcerting accuracy. Before I arrive to the crux of my argument in the next section of the essay, I want in this prelude to employ Caesar's *Approximations (Cosmococas/Offices)* to provide some historical context and prepare the ground for the considerations on incorporation and resistance that follows by elaborating a bit on post-Fordism—particularly on the special relation between post-Fordist labour and performance.

Caesar's series of diptychs demonstrates how the lounging and playing that Oiticica and D'Almeida envisioned as remedies against the deadening demands of productive labour are now employed as techniques to *increase* productivity in contemporary workplaces. Note that this is not merely a diachronous comparison, but a genealogical critique that cuts both ways. More than just a straightforward indictment against 'playbour' and assorted contemporary working practices that have co-opted or appropriated properly liberatory tools only *post festum*, the fact that the *Cosmococas* are near-indistinguishable from your nearest Google corporate quarters can also be seen as retrospectively raising some pertinent questions concerning Oiticica's artistic project—or, at

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<sup>2</sup> For more on neo-concrete art, see Ronaldo Brito's seminal essay (Brito 2017). For more on the *Cosmococas* in particular, see Sabeth Buchmann and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz's monograph on the series (Buchman and Hinderer Cruz 2013).

the very least, concerning the art historical ‘discovery’ and institutional canonization of Oiticica’s work, which is relatively recent and coincides with the ascendancy of post-Fordist labour.



**Fig. 1:** Caesar’s *Approximations (Cosmococas/Offices)* juxtaposes an image of one of Oiticica and D’Ameida’s *Cosmococas* (with hammocks and wall projections of ‘drawings’ Oiticica did in cocaine on top of a Jimi Hendrix record) with a photo of a contemporary office environment.

Sofia Caesar, *Approximations (Cosmococas/Offices)*, 2019. Digital print on paper, applied directly to the gallery wall. Installation view at *Canseira*, Centro Municipal de Arte Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, October 5 – November 30, 2019. Photo: Pat Kilgore.

It is not coincidental that theoretical attempts at grappling with the experience of work under post-Fordism have repeatedly relied on the figure of an approximation similar and related to the one traced in Caesar’s wall pieces: the approximation of labour and performance. Paolo Virno has famously likened post-Fordist work to virtuoso performance—exemplified, for Virno, by the classical pianist Glenn Gould—for its absence of a clear end product and the way in which it tends to revolve around a spectacularisation and ‘staging’ of one’s work for others (52-66). Sven Lütticken has characterised ‘*general performance* as the basis of the new labor,’ the latter of which

actualises the programmes of (neo-)avant-gardist (performance) art in unanticipated—and frequently perverse—ways (1, emphasis in original). It is worth noting that ‘performance’, for both Virno and Lütticken, comes to connote something almost diametrically opposed to the ‘performance principle’ that, according to Herbert Marcuse, was the dominant form taken by the reality principle in what now appears as a pre-post-Fordist modernity. This economic formation was still characterised by rationalisation, bureaucratisation, and specialisation, as well as by a proliferation of disciplinary practices described by Marcuse as ‘surplus repression’ (44-45).<sup>3</sup> Post-Fordism, in contrast, captures and capitalises on much of what more ‘old-fashioned,’ industrial-style regimes of labour were and still are at pains to eliminate and suppress; it is in this sense that one may speak of a shift ‘from discipline to performance’—to employ Jon McKenzie’s formulation (2001).

The approximation of labour and performance has been registered in writing on performance art as well. To give but one out of many possible examples: in a critical assessment of some recent re-performances of pieces by Marina Abramović (and of the exploitative conditions under which the performers interpreting the pieces laboured), Bojana Kunst has argued that ‘in today’s capitalism we work in the manner that Abramović calls performance mode’ (42). In an essay equally critical of Abramović’s (re-)performances, E. C. Feiss concludes by making a case for the integration and consideration of the entanglement of performance with post-Fordist work in the reception of performance art. The finer points or implications of the various theorisations of the approximation of post-Fordist labour and performance mentioned here may well be debatable. Concerning Virno, for example, rightful objections have been raised against what appears as an at times wilful misreading of crucial passages in Marx on performance (Boyle 15), or indeed against the confused reception and

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<sup>3</sup> Raphael Fonseca, curator of *Canseira*, mentions *Eros and Civilization* concludes his brief essay on the exhibition by saying that if Oiticica and D’Almeida drew inspiration from reading Marcuse’s classic, the appropriate theoretical reference for Caesar’s work would be Byung-Chul Han’s pamphlet *The Burnout Society*.

employment of Virno's notion of virtuosity in performance scholarship (Jackson 17). But as Caesar's *Approximations (Cosmococas/Offices)* shows, the figure of this approximation itself—which Caesar's work concretises, specifies, and gives a determinate content—remains hard to ignore as a sign of the times.

## **Incorporation**

In this essay, I examine the treatment of post-Fordist labour and incorporation in two pieces by visual artist Sofia Caesar, namely *Linhas de excesso (Excess Lines)* (2017) and *Workation* (2019). In doing so, I place some emphasis on instances of the performative in these two works, as well as on their framing and usage of media technologies. Incorporation, here, designates the operations by which bodily movements and gestures are rendered productive of exchange-value and the processes by which this commodification of movement and gesture in turn comes to be embodied and inhabited by subjects. In their brief foreword to an edited volume entitled *Incorporations*, Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter write that their title encompasses both 'the integration of human life forces into the larger-than-human systems of social and technical organization' and 'the finer-grained processes of embodiment' (12). My usage of 'incorporation' similarly comprises, and hinges on, both meanings of the term—incorporation *of* and incorporation *in* the subject, if you will, or passively *being incorporated* and actively *incorporating*. As such, incorporation designates not only capital's subsumption and expropriation of the labour-power of (working) bodies, but refers also to how, as Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt write in *History & Obstinacy*, '[a]ll external forms of labor, as well as the tools they involve, replicate themselves on the subjective side of humans' (92). According to Kluge and Negt, this engenders the development of an obstinacy in and among human beings. This obstinacy emerges 'out of a resistance to primitive expropriation', but as such is also its product (390).

Crary and Kwinter, as well as Kluge and Negt, are concerned with modernity at large—with the *longue durée* of how labour-power

comes to be extracted from bodies which in turn interiorise, respond to, and become formed by those very processes of extraction. Clearly, however, the work of these authors acquires a renewed pertinence under post-Fordism. For what the aforementioned theorisations of the approximation of post-Fordist labour and performance invariably signal is that the rendering-productive of the body, as well as the bodily internalisation of productivity, take on new forms in post-Fordism, and become manifest in distinctly novel ways. In what follows, I read Caesar's work for its reading of these new forms and manifestations of incorporation under post-Fordism.

In so doing, I want to foreground how *Linhas de excesso* and *Workation* present a dramatisation of an ambivalence particular to post-Fordist incorporation, where the body is at once made productive and becomes the site of something that is like a resistance—but, I will argue, should more properly be called a recalcitrance—to its own productivity. My discussion of the works therefore moves both with and against two opposing inclinations in critical theory, which tend either to present the integration in and appropriation by capital of bodily movement and performance as a *fait accompli*, or to valorise the body as inherently, if also residually, resistant to such integration and appropriation. I will argue that Caesar's works, by contrast, show how the emancipatory potential of bodily movement and performance is deeply and ambivalently entangled with its post-Fordist commodification.

My desire is to further demonstrate that Caesar's ambiguous treatment of incorporation—which is reflected by my double usage of that term here—evinces and articulates a fine-grained understanding of incorporation as a process in which bodies are not only worked with but also worked on. This, of course, implies serious complications for the political project of opposing post-Fordist incorporation, which cannot be resisted in any simple or straightforward manner. A pedagogy such as the one imagined by Oiticica and D'Almeida, aimed at liberating the body and its movements from the constraints imposed by productive labour conceived as basically external and foreign to that body, will not do.



*Linhas de excesso*

The video essay *Linhas de excesso* originates from research conducted by Caesar in the (media) archives of automobile producer Fiat's factory in Turin, where the company has its headquarters. It sets off with the familiar media-historical trope (initiated by the Lumière brothers in 1895 and historicised in 1995 in a Harun Farocki video) of workers leaving the factory. The silent, black-and white film of Fiat workers exiting the site of production is accompanied by an audio-track in which we hear the artist in conversation with a Fiat employee who is assisting her in navigating the archive. The employee seems particularly interested in pointing out one worker who, according to him, looks like a young Johnny Depp. All the while, visibly layered underneath the archival material, is footage of Caesar lying in a somewhat uncomfortable-looking pose (see Figure 2). Throughout the video, she will be at pains to simultaneously manipulate what appears to be a remote control for the camera filming her (in her right hand), and her smartphone (in her left hand). The latter item, the smartphone, is dubbed a 'pocket factory' in the text that appears atop both the historical and the newly shot footage.

First, it is important to note that *Linhas de excesso* explores scientific and technical models for the optimization of bodily movement in production lines—models that increase productivity by minimizing effort and eliminating any unnecessary manoeuvres. The video essay includes historical footage (from the Fiat archives) that served both to conduct Taylorist-style research and to didactically explain such research's principles. One worker is seen robotically bending his forearm up and down in a perfect ninety-degree angle; another clip shows only a hand repeating a gripping movement in synchrony with a metronome. This historical footage, in *Linhas de excesso*, is juxtaposed with contemporary and high-tech looking registrations of human bodily movement by means of a motion capture suit. The suggestion here is one of continuity between these diachronic models of ergonomic optimisation, which strive to get rid of 'excessive' movement and, in so

doing, more effectively incorporate workers' bodies as a transparent, rationalised, and controllable component in production processes.



**Fig. 2:** Archival footage of workers leaving Fiat's Turin factory, layered over footage of Caesar using the camera remote control.

Sofia Caesar, *Linhas de excesso*, 2017. Single-screen video, 7'13".

Beyond this, however, *Linhas de excesso* mostly emphasises the discontinuities between Fordist and post-Fordist (or, as we hear the artist interject at one point, "Toyotist") modes of work. The video includes, for instance, desktop footage showing an interactive 'virtual tour' through the Fiat factory, which allows online visitors to navigate through and explore the premises much like in Google Streetview. So much for the 'hidden abode of production'. And so much, indeed, for the clear-cut separation, both spatial and temporal, between work and non-work that made the historical trope of 'workers leaving the factory' possible and relevant in the first place. For *Linhas de excesso* also includes fragments of a series of videos which—as Caesar comments in the voice-over—are institutional even if they are made by the Fiat workers themselves. Here, we find groups of workers not leaving Fiat's premises but filming themselves dancing in their offices and among (turned-off)

factory machinery (see Figure 3). The soundtrack is an instrumental rendition of Pharrell Williams' song 'Happy'. Within *Linhas de excesso*, this footage comes to signal not only the blurring of work and leisure, but also to demonstrate how ostensibly non-instrumental and 'excessive' movement (like dancing) is not so much eliminated as strategically stimulated, channelled, and captured; it is instrumentalised and turned productive as branding, public image, and PR. Importantly, the incorporation of workers' bodies relies on the surface preservation of the antithesis of work and non-work in the instance of its effective eclipse; the economic valorisation of the workers' 'off-time' performances remains deeply contingent on its signification and reception in terms of 'inefficient' and 'unproductive' creativity, spontaneity, sociability, and participation. Much like in *Approximations (Cosmococas/Offices)*, this is the post-Fordist approximation of labour and performance at its most palpable.



**Fig. 3:** Contemporary workers dancing in Fiat's Turin factory. Sofia Caesar, *Linhas de excesso*, 2017. Single-screen video, 7'13".

Caesar's own appearance in *Linhas de excesso* functions as something of a counterpoint to and a commentary on the dancing of these factory workers. Her performance, too, involves filming and (re)presenting herself. Slowly operating the camera's remote control and her phone (with which, from her pose, she appears to be trying to take a selfie) at the same time, she is seen twisting herself up somewhat unhappily (see Figure 4). While the economic productivity of the workers' dances relied on a disavowal and ostensible negation of productivity, here there can be no question that Caesar's performance takes some effort—that it looks like work. There is nothing particularly liberatory, or indeed excessive, about movement as it is staged here. For Caesar makes sure to make her body appear as reifying itself into a component of a somatechnical constellation which may be of her own making, but over which she ultimately appears to have only very limited mastery. Caesar's movements and gestures, hardly those of a prosthetic god, come across as directly dictated by the devices that she employs to register them; we see her in the process of becoming an extension of her tools and media devices rather than the other way around. If the smartphone is a factory that can be tucked away in one's pocket—as Caesar does in *Linhas de excesso*—it is also an apparatus that envelops, encapsulates, and incorporates.<sup>4</sup> In this process of incorporation, dramatised by Caesar's performance, the body at work is simultaneously the material being worked—obtuse, obdurate, *recalcitrant*.

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4 In his essay 'What Is an Apparatus?' Giorgio Agamben sees the fact that 'the gestures and behaviors of individuals have been reshaped from head to toe by the cellular phone' as evidence that it 'would probably not be wrong to define the extreme phase of capitalist development in which we live as a massive accumulation and proliferation of apparatuses' (15-16).



**Fig. 4:** Caesar operating the camera remote control while ostensibly taking a selfie.

Sofia Caesar, *Linhas de excesso*, 2017. Single-screen video, 7'13".

### ***Workation***

In more ways than one, *Workation* picks up where *Linhas de excesso* left off. Named after a very post-Fordist neologism—a portmanteau of ‘work’ and ‘vacation’—the work addresses the fading of the boundaries between work and free time. If, in ‘classical’ Fordist capitalism, free time could be seen as subterraneously ‘shackled to its opposite’ (Adorno 187), current iterations of post-Fordist production disappear the opposition altogether. *Workation* is a video installation in variable dimensions and consists of a somewhat lounge-like landscape formed by a large carpet and a set of cushions and pillows, all in a glorious bright yellow. Scattered throughout this landscape lie electronic devices of various scales, which therefore demand various degrees of closeness and intimacy of their viewers: a smartphone, a tablet, a laptop, and a large LCD screen (see Figure 5).

Each of these four devices displays a short clip; all of the individual clips are mute, though there is a single unifying audio track that can be heard all through *Workation*. In each clip, the setting is

different, but the scenario (which invariably unfolds in a single shot) is more or less the same. We see Caesar ostensibly engaged in ‘remote work’—at the beach, in bed, in a hammock, and on a home terrace—using her laptop, her phone, or both. All of the clips involve the artist revealing, either at the beginning or at the end of the scene, and always via her phone, a stock photograph representing someone joyfully at work in a setting highly similar to hers. And in each of them, Caesar enters into a process of performative overidentification with the stock image, a process of corrupted and corrupting mimicry. Steadily, and with increasing awkwardness, she adjusts her initial posture signalling a blend of comfort and productivity, finally to come to ‘rest’ in an uneasy-looking pose where she appears as inert, exhausted, spent. In *Linhas de excesso*, Caesar’s subtly contorted movements could still be seen as effecting, but also as the effect of, a form of productivity. *Workation* shows what is in many ways the logical end point of such efforts: utter enervation. The ultimate depletion and arrestation of bodily motion here signals a failure to live up to a certain (stock) image of productivity, a failure on behalf of the subject to fully coincide with the prototype—or, as Brian Holmes (2002) would have it, the Weberian ideal type—of the ‘flexible personality’.

I want to single out one of the clips in *Workation* because it expresses certain particularities of post-Fordist work which are worth mentioning here. The scene showing Caesar on a beach in Rio—sat on a folding chair, typing away on her phone, with her laptop resting on her knees—is something of an exception in the *Workation* ‘tetralogy’, in that it is the only instance in which Caesar is not by herself. Not only can other beachgoers be discerned in the background of this clip: it also shows other people at work (see Figure 6). Specifically, just as Caesar initiates her slow collapse, two men selling clothing and beach paraphernalia pass by at close distance. The artist, however, is oblivious to them, and similarly the two passers-by ignore her strange and contrived swooning. Among other things, this brief scene is one of a missed encounter between subjects who could have recognised each other as affected—albeit differentially—by the exigencies of the

capitalist mode of production. As such, it comes to index the extent to which even highly precarious manifestations of post-Fordist work are still products as well as markers of privilege (in this scene, particularly class and racial privilege) within the global totality of capitalist relations, and to signal the social atomisation that such privilege entails. Another way of saying this would be to argue that while Caesar, in the other clips constituting *Workation*, is merely alone, this particular scene speaks to a deeply political loneliness.



**Fig. 5:** Installation view of *Workation*, with another diptych from *Approximations (Cosmococas/Offices)* visible in the background.

Sofia Caesar, *Workation*, 2019. Four-channel video installation: LCD screen, laptop, tablet, smartphone. Dimensions variable. Background: Sofia Caesar, *Approximations (Cosmococas/Offices)*, 2019. Installation view at *Canseira*, Centro Municipal de Arte Hélio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, October 5 – November 30, 2019. Photo: Pat Kilgore.

Again, Caesar's performance shows the working subject becoming glaringly object-like in the proximity of tools supposed to empower it. In *Workation*, the mode of this showing seems to demand to be read as comic (perhaps like a post-Fordist version of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*), but is ultimately not exactly funny as it rejoins

‘Henri Bergson’s classic location of comic laughter at the spectacle of ‘something mechanical encrusted upon the living’ with the ‘*question* of what’s living, what’s mechanical, and who needs to know’ (Berlant and Ngai 234, emphasis in original). Are Caesar’s laptop and phone encrusted upon her, or is it the other way around? And what, one may indeed ask, is living or lively here? For Caesar is seen reduced by fatigue to a seemingly inanimate state of stillness and crude materiality. Such a state is recalcitrant in that it presents an obstacle to the body’s effective incorporation (while also, as should be clear by now, being its result).

Not coincidentally, exhaustion and assorted bodily forms of ‘malfunction’ tend increasingly to be seen—and experienced—as a vestigial testimony to what Elizabeth Grosz has called the ‘ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control’ (xi).<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Crary’s account of capitalism’s struggles to overcome the obstacle of sleep—which, as a consequence, comes to feature as a subversively anti-capitalist ‘activity’—is exemplary here (2014). Anson Rabinbach, in an earlier study that was highly influential for Crary, has similarly shown that throughout capitalist modernity, fatigue was ‘linked to the body’s natural resistance to the demands of productivity’ (23) and treated as a ‘stubborn resistance to perpetual work that distinguished the human body from a machine’ (2). Caesar’s work complicates such identifications of a residual resistance in the body, qualifying the view of the body as a ‘natural’ barrier against its own incorporation while also, and importantly, not dispensing with it altogether.

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5 It is worth observing that while Grosz is careful to think the materiality of the body not as ‘natural’ and stable given, but rather as historically contingent and subject to various forms of inscription, the ‘always’ here arguably suggests an exceptional occasion in which she gives in to the tendency to think the human body as innately resistant.





**Fig. 6:** Detail of *Workation*, with the LCD screen showing Caesar (no longer) at work on the beach in Rio.

## Not Yet

In both *Linhas de excesso* and *Workation*, the incorporated body is too organic still to partake in promethean fantasies of cyborg empowerment, while also being just cybernetic enough for exploitation. It comes to figure, therefore, as a fleshy knot pulled from all sides by contradictions refusing to produce their own dialectical overcoming. This is most explicitly the case in *Workation*, where fatigue does effectively lead to what can be seen as a corporeal stoppage (with the body forcing itself to go on strike, as it were), but where this fatigue and stoppage are also emphatically the effect, and indeed the culmination, of the process of incorporation itself. Ironically, ‘vacation’ here comes to designate not free time but the state of a body from which all energy has seemingly been drained. And while Caesar’s performance in *Linhas de excesso* is less extreme (in that it is less concerned with the outer limit or endpoint of incorporation), the same ambivalence regarding corporeality’s potential to resist being rendered productive is present there as well.

My desire to insist that, in Caesar’s work, the (working) body appears as recalcitrant rather than properly resistant to its

own incorporation has much to do with this ambivalence. The recalcitrant body is antithetical to, but also a product of, processes of incorporation. At least at first, this ambivalence engenders a strong sense of political impasse and even passivity. There appears to be nothing particularly heartening or quickening about *Linhas de excesso* and *Workation*; emancipation, empowerment, or indeed any apparent possibility for politically positive action are nowhere immediately in sight, so that speaking of ‘resistance’ here would be inaccurate and a misrepresentation of what is conveyed in the work. Where resistance implies a wilful and active (if also reactive) oppositionality more or less straightforwardly geared towards emancipatory ends, recalcitrance is less directed, more ambivalent than confrontational, more emphatically conditioned by and complicit with that which it opposes. I want to assert, however, the importance of not seeing such recalcitrance—and its accompanying sense of ambiguity and impasse—as void or exclusive of political possibility.

In this, my argument is informed by (and is congruous with) Judith Butler’s work on subjection. Subjection, for Butler, ‘signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject’ (2). Butler’s insistence on thinking both significations together leads to some thorny questions regarding agency—especially political agency against those forms of subordination that inaugurate and condition the subject (10). Butler argues that the subject exceeds and is only imperfectly continuous with its subjection. It is ‘*neither* fully determined by power *nor* fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both),’ and as such ‘exceeds the logic of noncontradiction’ (Butler 17, emphasis original). Similarly, resistance and recalcitrance are not simply mutually exclusive opposites of each other (with the former presenting effective politicisation and the latter its absence), and recalcitrance, though deeply marked by and dependent on the powers it is produced by, can also negate and work against those very powers.

A recalcitrance, then, that is not *not* resistance, but not *yet* resistance. The ‘not yet’ here is important in that it speaks to a latent potential, an unspoken promise perhaps, for the recalcitrance of

the incorporated body to effect and initiate political processes of emancipation impossible to fully foresee or anticipate. Such a conception of recalcitrance not only helps ward off self-defeating assumptions of political pessimism, but also to complement and to question overly heroic and vanguardist understandings or notions of resistance as the privileged mode of political activity. It involves a recognition that forms of struggle against post-Fordist incorporation may not necessarily lie worlds apart from the forms of subjection such incorporation entails—and that, by extension, resistance anyhow necessitates non-oppositional thinking precisely to the extent to which it is always and inevitably resistance in opposition to something. Therefore, if Caesar's works tarry with the negative, this is not exclusively a fatal strategy nor a sure sign of defeatism. José Esteban Muñoz, seizing and building on the work of Ernst Bloch, has argued that in aesthetic practice failure and negativity intimate the dimension of the utopian as a critical contention that things could, and indeed should, be otherwise (173).

Certainly, Caesar offers no guarantees that incorporation can or will be overcome. And works like *Linhas de excesso* and *Workation* prescribe no pathways for proceeding politically. The assertion that these pieces bring into view a bodily recalcitrance that is *not yet* a resistance is no longer descriptive, analytical, or for that matter 'reasonable' in any strict sense; it is, rather, an utterance aspiring to prove performative against all odds. The present intensification of incorporation, as Caesar's work shows, produces antinomies that are all too clearly and all too painfully felt by post-Fordist subjects—including myself. There is no need to add to the injury of present-day political and economic practice the insult of gloomy doomsday theories revelling in the totality and inevitability of whichever ongoing catastrophe, scoffing at even the thought of the possibility of any form of amelioration, which is thereby effectively foreclosed. A better response to Caesar's work, more invigorating and more politically fruitful, would be to want to see and say that its negativity surely cannot be merely that, and to learn to recognize in it a helplessly hopeful (or was it helpfully hopeless?) insistence on what is not yet.

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## **‘Doing Housework Doing Laundry’: Spectacularization of Labor in *Caroline, or Change***

By Hansol Oh

### **Abstract**

In this article, I investigate the spectacularization of labor in Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori’s musical *Caroline, or Change* (2003). Drawing from the transformative power of spectacle, I contend that overlaying the actor’s theatrical labor and the character’s theatricalized work makes the otherwise hidden issues of labor hyper visible and tangible. I discuss how the musical defines the title character through her work as a maid and illuminates the socioeconomic forces that shape her work. In addition, I analyze the anthropomorphized electronic appliances that work alongside the title character. The deliberate juxtaposition of a black maid’s domestic labor with electronic appliances embodied by live actors, positions labor at the center of the spectacle. By foregrounding work both in narrative and spectacularizing it on stage, the musical ultimately subverts the ‘mammy’ stereotype that naturalizes and conceals issues of inequality and exploitation. Also, when the character’s and the actor’s work bleed into each other, marginalized characters are empowered through the spectacular theatrical labor of performers, transforming their work into an object of appreciation and celebration. Hence the musical’s spectacularization of labor reveals theatre as a productive site, where the increasingly privatized and naturalized neoliberal redefinition of work can be publicized and challenged.

In her book, *The Problem With Work*, feminist scholar Kathi Weeks posits that the current capitalist system, which continuously naturalizes and normalizes waged work, leaves little room to question the organization of work. ‘The social role of waged work’, Weeks writes, ‘has been so naturalized as to seem necessary and inevitable, something that might be tinkered with but never escaped. [...] Th[e] effort to make work, at once public and political is, then, one way to counter the forces that would naturalize, privatize, individualize, ontologize, and also, thereby, depoliticize it’ (7). This engagement with the ‘effort to make work more public and political’ has become more pressing and urgent in what is

variously referred to as the 'new' economy, the 'post-Fordist' economy, or, in its latest manifestation, the 'gig' economy—where creativity, innovation, and risks are repackaged to mask the precarious position of workers and promoted as a revamped, appealing lifestyle option.

In the context of increasingly precarious working conditions, an examination of how work and working characters are represented, negotiated, and critiqued on stage renders theatre a productive site for enacting issues of labor. Attending to the work, and its spectacle, presses the audience to recognize theatre as a space where 'one group of people spend leisure time sitting in the dark to watch others spend their working time under lights pretending to be other people' (Ridout 6). It also invites the audience to observe the different layers of work that take place in front of them. With *Caroline, or Change* (2003), Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori bring the private, domestic workplace of the title character into the public sphere: the theatrical stage (a private sphere within a public sphere). They expose the forces that naturalize, privatize, and individualize issues of work, inequality, and opportunity, thus urging the audience to examine how the socio-economic structure of the 1960s American South shapes Caroline's work and life. Drawing from renewed attention to the transformative power of spectacle, I contend that, by overlaying the actor's theatrical labor of performance and the character's theatricalized work on stage, the musical makes the otherwise hidden issues of labor hyper visible and tangible.

After four years of development, Kushner and Tesori's *Caroline, or Change* premiered off Broadway at the Public Theater in 2003 under the direction of George C. Wolfe and then transferred to Broadway's Eugene O'Neill Theatre, playing for 136 performances.<sup>1</sup> Partly inspired by the author's childhood memories,<sup>2</sup> the musical is set in November

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1 My analysis of the staging is based on the recording of a 2004 Broadway production, presented at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, that I accessed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

2 The musical contains the most autobiographical elements compared to his other works. For instance, Kushner grew up in Lake Charles, Louisiana and was about the same age as Noah Gellman's character in 1963. Other characters

and December 1963 and dramatizes the changes that, small and large, take place in the lives of Caroline, a Black maid, and her liberal Jewish employers, the Gellmans, right around the time of Kennedy's assassination and the start of the Civil Rights Movement.

Caroline, the stoic heroine presented as ever resistant to change, opens the musical announcing 'Nothing ever happens underground in Louisiana' (Kushner 11). As one commentator put it, the musical 'eschewed Broadway spectacle, sacrificing these tools of the musical for depth of character and theme' (Fisher 85). Considering its subject matter, which explores economic and race relations just before the Civil Rights Movement in the segregated South, it is perhaps not surprising that the musical lacks a dazzling chorus line, flamboyant costumes, or jaw-dropping set changes, which are typically associated with a Broadway spectacle today. These features of spectacle, perhaps best exemplified in *Wicked*—which competed alongside *Caroline, or Change* for the Tony Award for best musical and won—are not found in *Caroline, or Change*. However, through their innovative dramaturgical construction, Kushner and Tesori push the boundaries of the form and, as I argue, do spectacularize the central theme of the musical: work.

In writing about the musical's transformative power, musical theatre scholar Scott McMillin observes that musical numbers allow for 'double characterization', through which the characters' 'musical versions enlarge them into lyrical power' (McMillin 21). In other words, the music is not simply integrated into the book to reveal the character's psychological depth but also elevates the character to another dimension through performance, to the point of disintegration. Millie Taylor, similarly problematizing the notion of integration in musical theatre, writes:

although the performer may maintain a realistic  
psychological development from one moment to

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draw inspiration from Kushner's childhood, for example the family employed a Black maid, Maudie Lee Davis, to whom Kushner dedicated the libretto. But other details differ in significant ways, clearly a making the show a fictionalized account of what happened in his childhood.



the next, the act of singing and the intrusion of the orchestra alter the mode of representation. The audience may still accept the performance as realistic within the genre, but the vocal technique, the beauty of the voice, the harmonious interaction with the orchestra, and, in some cases, the simultaneous delivery by several performers all allow the mechanics of the performance to be revealed. (Taylor 116)

In performance, a musical's very dramaturgical construction is not just revealed through disjunction and disunification of theatrical elements, but, rather, musicals thrive on powerful performances that expose their artifice. McMillin identifies a musical's political potential in 'the crackle of difference' (2). The genre's roots in satiric popular entertainment and self-aware aesthetic suggest the genre's 'potential for resisting structures of wealth and power' that allows room for constant reinvention and transformation (McMillin 29). *Caroline, or Change* engages with this political potential through its innovative dramaturgy by amplifying the gap between the characters' and the actors' work and revealing 'the mechanics of the performance' (Taylor 116). Psychological realism, on the other hand, in its effort to create a faithful illusion of the outside world onstage, calls for the theatrical artifice to disappear; the actor should disappear into the role to become a seamless whole with the character. However, musical theatre's dramaturgy opens up gaps for the theatrical labor of actors to become palpable in the crack between the dramatic narrative and the performance. *Caroline, or Change*, in particular, makes this disjunction felt through what I refer to as 'spectacularization of labor' by overlaying the characters' work and the actor's work and sheds light on the different layers of work.

Both Baz Kershaw and Amy Hughes' observations in regard to spectacle are pertinent to my focus on spectacularized labor, in that placing work and working characters as the focal point in a theatrical performance thrusts the work of the character and the performer into the spotlight, as well as the historical and social forces that shape them. Historicizing the anti-spectacular bias in the fields of theatre history and criticism, Kershaw argues that, in today's performative

society, spectacle gains a new critical potency because of its power to create an excess reaction in people (Kershaw 592). In a similar vein, unpacking how melodramatic performances served nineteenth century American society's social reform, Amy Hughes proposes 'spectacle as methodology' and argues that spectacle has the 'potential to destabilize, complicate, or sustain sedimented ideological beliefs' (Hughes 4). As I will demonstrate in this article, spectacle in *Caroline, or Change* does not function as a decorative element to the visual aesthetic but serves a dramaturgical purpose. By bringing work and working characters into visual and kinesthetic focus, the musical subverts the 'mammy' stereotype, renders hidden labor hyper visible, and empowers marginalized subjects through the theatrical labor of its performers.

Originating in the early nineteenth century, the mammy stereotype is typically associated with the image of a faithful servant, presenting an enslaved Black woman as a devoted loving caretaker of a white family (McElya 4). The mammy is often portrayed as an overweight, motherly figure of advanced age whose physical attributes make her appear asexual, 'an unsuitable sexual partner for White men' (Collins 84). Such characterization has historically served to hide Black women's sexual objectification and to 'legitimate relations between Black women and White men as maternal and nurturing, not sexual' (McElya 8). Painted as a loyal and nurturing caregiver for a white family, the mammy narratives leave her role as a mother and caregiver in her Black family unexamined in favor of portraying her as good-humored and content to serve the master's family wholeheartedly. Such delineation deliberately misrepresents Black women's affective and physical labor on the job as a spontaneous and natural act of love and simultaneously obscures and romanticizes the coercive and exploitative nature of the work they performed in white households. This stereotype has had a lasting impact on Black womanhood and functions as a 'controlling image', significantly limiting the ways in which Black women are perceived and treated (Collins 72).

In the musical, *Caroline* is first and foremost defined by her work and her economic needs. As a maid for the Gellmans, she

'cook[s] and clean[s] and mind[s] th[e] boy, / doing housework doing laundry' for a weekly salary of thirty dollars (Kushner 17). Working as an underpaid maid and raising four children has made Caroline exhausted, and she is constantly characterized as angry and unhappy. The radio introduces her, '[a]ll day long you wear a frown. / Dressed in white and feelin' low, / ... Doin' laundry, full of woe' (Kushner 12). Noah and Rose Gellman make similar observations. Caroline is always angry and never smiles (Kushner 14, 50). Caroline's profoundly sad role subverts the centuries-old 'mammy' stereotype by showing 'her distaste for the job' (Thomas 205). In addition to her visible dissatisfaction with her job, Caroline's refusal to perform affective labor clearly frames her activities in the Gellmans' household as wage work. For example, she does not reciprocate Noah's affection for her and turns down his request to wish him good night saying, '[t]hat not my job' (Kushner 45). Additionally, Caroline distances herself from Rose's friendly gestures, which underscore her understanding of their relationship, not as friends, but as employer and employee.

In addition to revising the mammy stereotype, the musical demands that we recognize the socioeconomic forces that shape Caroline's work. We view her work and subjection not as individual traits but as the products of socioeconomic conventions. Although we see Caroline as chronically sad and exhausted, Dotty, a fellow maid and a friend who has known Caroline for many years, attests to a different Caroline. When Caroline blames Dotty for her changes, Dotty refutes the claim by singing:

Once you was quick,  
and once you was bright;  
now it seem you come to some confusion,  
you losin courage, you losin light,  
lost your old shine, lost Caroline. (Kushner 33)

Additionally, Emmie, Caroline's daughter, asks her mother if she remembers fun, implying a past when Caroline was capable of dreaming and laughing (Kushner 42). Caroline never expected to be working as

a maid for twenty-two years when she first started. In much the same way as Emmie is vocal about her wants and desires, Caroline too was once an aspiring young woman. She thought she'd 'be / better off than this!' (Kushner 17), and that she'd be 'someplace cooler, someplace high, / someplace where there's something dry [...] / doing something finer' (Kushner 18).

Yet, the musical number 'Ironing' reveals that her subjection is a product of wage relations shaped by the Segregationist South. Caroline and her husband struggled because there was 'no work for Negro men' (Kushner 71). Even when there was an opportunity, her husband could not secure employment because white workers dominated the labor union (*ibid.*). His prolonged unemployment status meant Caroline was the breadwinner for her family of six, which eventually led to the couple's separation. Although Dotty suggests Caroline can choose to make a change in her life, the backstory clearly illustrates the insurmountable systemic racism and inequality that lay in Caroline's way—and which has trapped Caroline in her job as a maid for more than two decades. Years of working as an underpaid domestic worker have hardened Caroline and put her in a vulnerable position. When Rose implements a new household rule to discipline Noah about money, she tells Caroline to take whatever loose change the boy leaves in his pants for laundry. What starts as a benign finance lesson for Noah spirals into humiliation for Caroline. She snaps at Rose that she 'ain't some ragpick / ain't some jackdaw', but, at the same time, she worries about losing her job. The Washing Machine and the Radio vocalize her concerns and desperation simultaneously:

THE WASHING MACHINE

Please please boss lady boss  
Lady New York lady don't don't  
fire me fire me can't do without  
do without do without money!

THE RADIO

Talk like that, talk like that,  
you won't be a maid no more

(Kushner 77)

As much as she resists performing affective labor for the Gellmans, she battles against herself to keep her job and disciplines herself to meet

their expectations.

The musical is noteworthy in that it makes 'work' a central theme by foregrounding Caroline's work visually and kinaesthetically. When Caroline is first introduced to the audience the stage directions break down her work process step by step, '[s]he's doing the laundry, sorting the clothes [...] Caroline opens the lid of the Washing Machine, and begins to load it with clothes [...] Caroline switches the Washing Machine on' (Kushner 11–12). The stage directions suggest that Caroline performs the domestic labor in a realistic manner as she would in a dramatic play. However, the sung-through form of the musical demands that Caroline's work of washing, ironing, folding laundry, and cooking is constantly overlaid with her singing. In other words, her represented work of doing laundry is not separated from the work of performance as in a book musical, where a realistic book scene is followed or interrupted by a musical number in which the actor breaks into a song and dances. Caroline's act of washing and ironing are presented simultaneously as the performer's singing. In this way, although within the dramatic narrative, the work takes place in the basement of a private household, in the theatricalized setting, the stage doubles as a workplace for both the character and the actor, publicizing both layers of work—Caroline's work in the basement and the actor's singing performance on stage.

One of the most striking and ingenious choices of the musical is the anthropomorphized appliances. Caroline works in solitude but is accompanied by 'a brand-new Nineteen-Sixty-Three / seven-cycle wash machine' (Kushner 11) and a dryer that sing along with her. Some commentators saw their presence as a product of a playful and theatrical imagination. Ben Brantley attributes the dramaturgical choice to Kushner's recent collaboration on *Brundibar* with Maurice Sendek, a renowned children's book author and illustrator (Brantley). Similarly, Fisher writes that 'these oddly whimsical anthropomorphic creatures, perhaps imagined as a result of Kushner's affection for children's literature (among his earliest works are children's plays) and the fact that one of his central characters is a child' (Fisher 101). I

argue, however, that the anthropomorphized characters add more than theatrical delight to the show and directly contribute to the spectacularization of labor.

In the off-Broadway premiere and original Broadway production, Capathia Jenkins played the Washing Machine and Chuck Cooper played the Dryer. Each actor stood on a platform slightly higher than their actual appliance, clearly visible and recognizable as live human actors. Both actors' physical presence not only made their charismatic performances stand out but made the basement on the stage appear cramped as Caroline describes it. The anthropomorphized appliances comment on Caroline's life, sometimes give a voice to the unspoken thoughts of the taciturn and stoic title character and sing about their own work. The Washing Machine sings in onomatopoeia, 'hum hum hum hum / round and round I agitates / while them what does the clothes awaits, / they contemplate and speculates, / in the peace my one-horsepower / lectric motor's hum creates' (Kushner 13) and '[w]ashin finish! Sweet and wet! / And cool! / My daily task is done!' (Kushner 15). The Dryer then takes over and sings, metaphorically referring to the work as physically and emotionally draining: '[t]ime's come to perspire! / Turn on the electric dryer! Sucking moisture out the air, / melt the hairspray in your hair! / Turn it on, turn on despair!' (Kushner 15–16). On both a narrative and performative level, the appliances assist Caroline in her work. As scholar Joanna Mansbridge observes, the appliances, cast with Black actors, 'visually recall the history of African American labor and possession of Black bodies as objects of labor' (Mansbridge 4). However, in performance, the appliances also harmonize with her. The music of Caroline and the singing appliances is grounded in the legacy of slavery, drawing inspiration from field holler, work songs, and spirituals ('Production' 00:16:20—00:16:41). Caroline, in particular, sings in a throaty, gravelly voice that communicates pain and struggle and the domestic appliances sing in Black musical idioms, such as blues, spirituals, and Motown, delineating the domestic labor as racialized. Musically, this historicizes and constructs Caroline's underpaid and exploited work as a continuing legacy of slavery. The

overlapping physical demands of both signifying (acting and singing) and signified (domestic work) forms of labor render both forms more palpable. Additionally, the routine of privatized and individualized domestic work is transformed into an object of aesthetic appreciation and located within the larger social and historical context of work.

The Radio, another anthropomorphized electrical appliance, plays a similar function. Embodied by three female actors in the Broadway production, the Radio's performance and musical style call to mind the Motown girl trio the Supremes and allude to the musical's early 1960s setting. In contrast to Caroline's hoarse and throaty vocals, which evoke pain and suffering, the Radio players sing in sweet and harmonious voices. By drawing from Motown sound, the Radio alludes to the social change its music carries implicitly. However, more significantly, the Radio's performance represents the limited segment of African-American work that was popularly recognized before the Civil Rights movement, as seen in the crossover hits produced by Motown in the mid-20th century. Although the label did not make explicit political statements, Reiland Rabaka notes that their music nevertheless carried messages of change:

It was not only ingenious, but it was also indicative of the desegregationist and integrationist ethos sweeping across African America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. [...] Motown was increasingly given entry into mainstream American popular culture at the exact same time that African Americans were desperately struggling to integrate into mainstream American society. In short, 1960s Motown music was implicitly Civil Rights Movement music without explicitly espousing traditional Civil Rights Movement themes, politics, and slogans. (Rabaka 145)

Read in this context, the Radio's glamorous and dazzling appearance in tight, shiny golden dresses and highly coiffed wigs add not only a spectacular element to the mostly domestic environment of the musical but also the lyrics of the Radio songs provide commentary on both Caroline's situation and the musical's action; however, it is notable

that these numbers are framed as the only diegetic songs. On the narrative level, the music from the radio provides an aural landscape for Caroline's world, but, on the stage, the music is performed live by actors who embody the Radio. Presenting songs from the radio not as disembodied sounds but as part of the live stage performance by the three female actors, the musical recasts them as entertainment workers performing for pay and aligns the actors' work with previous generations of entertainment workers. In light of this observation, I argue that the Radio character makes multiple layers of work on stage tangible, spectacularizing their labor.

Spectacularizing theatrical labor renders invisible labor visible, but it can also empower marginalized characters who perform underappreciated and invisible labor through the laboring performance of the actors. Although the dramatic narrative features Caroline as a marginalized subject who is exhausted from too much work, the physical demands of the live performance contradict the narrative and create a strikingly different result. In her analysis of the 1966 musical *Sweet Charity*, Stacy Wolf notes the transformative power of spectacle in musical theatre. The dramatic narrative portrays the female protagonist as victimized and disempowered by men; however, in live performance, the scene becomes an occasion for a pulsating performance that contradicts the narrative. Noting how musical theatre's use of multiple modes of expression and the demand of live performance can create a powerful, transformative spectacle, Wolf writes:

Interestingly, though, these 'victim' scenes foreground the typical status of Charity's body as active and self-assured, a theatrical embodiment of athletic self-possession. Charity's ostensible weakness, then, is contradicted by the actor's strength in performance, especially in singing and dancing. Her inability to attract and keep a man is contradicted by the appeal of her character to the audience; her awkwardnesses are contradicted by her excellent, strong, and graceful dancing. In this way, *Sweet Charity* repeatedly and insistently enacts a paradox between saying and doing, and, yet, the result is not cynicism: the exuberant



action—the 'doing'—performatively brings feminist possibilities into being. (Wolf 63)

*Caroline, or Change* does not offer dance numbers that showcase the actors' athleticism, but its sung-through form and the range of vocals demand strong singing voices. Here, the actor's singing performance achieves a similar effect of transforming Caroline into a larger-than-life figure, contradicting the dramatic narrative.

A prime example is when Caroline sings the eleven o'clock number, 'Lot's Wife.' In the Broadway production, Tonya Pinkins appeared on an almost-empty stage to sing about her despair at having to go back to work after a humiliating head-on confrontation with the eight-year-old Noah, which further draws attention to her desperate economic situation. In one critic's words, '[t]he song is an act of psychic demolition' (Lahr), and yet Pinkins' electrifying performance contradicts the song's words and elevates her character to a heroic level, transforming Caroline into a rebellious and assertive figure. Pinkins, who originated the role of Caroline, is a Tony Award winner for *Jelly's Last Jam* and is known for her powerhouse performances. In his otherwise lukewarm review of the production, Ben Brantley highly praises Pinkins's strong performance: 'Ms. Pinkins has never been better than she is here, in an intense, controlled performance [...] Even when confessing her weaknesses to God, she remains formidable. You can see why Noah would idolize her' (Brantley). Critic Adam Feldman, in his rave review, wrote that Pinkins's 'soon-to-be-legendary performance alone would be worth the price of admission' (Feldman). As these critical commentaries attest, the character presented as weak and defeated on the page is transformed into a strong figure on the stage through Pinkins's performance.<sup>3</sup>

A comparison of the promotional materials for the musical's

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3 Pinkins's portrayal of Caroline won her numerous accolades, including a Tony nomination for best performance by a leading actress in 2004 and a Laurence Olivier nomination for Best Actress in a Musical in 2007. She also took home the Obie Award and the Lucille Lortel Award for best actress in a musical. In addition, she won the 2004 Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award and the Backstage 'Garland Award' for her performance in *Caroline, or Change*.

two major productions is illustrative of the transformative power of spectacularization and its significance—its Broadway premiere and a Broadway revival production transferred from London’s West End. The original Broadway poster for the musical features an illustration of Caroline, recognizably Tonya Pinkins, during her cigarette break. Dressed in her crisp white uniform and white stockings, Caroline is clutching her right arm with her left hand while holding a cigarette between her fingers. Her profoundly sad facial expression and her slouched shoulders suggest her exhaustion and weariness from a long day of work. Simultaneously, her right hand hanging loosely and the slightly revealed legs—one folded and the other stretched—exude erotic tension. Kushner affirmed the image by observing it is

strangely sexy, there’s something quite sensual about the expression on her face, the lips are slightly parted, her legs are held together in a way that suggests a sensual life, and the dress defines her. There’s something both forbidding and heartbreaking about it, there’s something very robust and erotic. (Kushner and Davis)

By this measure, the poster image creates a powerful counterweight to the stereotypical ‘mammy’ image, subverting the stereotypical image of the grinning, asexual ‘mammy’ (see Thomas). This image was reused for the book cover when the libretto was published and has become most closely associated with the musical. However, this portrait of Caroline remains a literal representation of her, as described in the text.

In contrast, the revival, directed by Michael Longhurst and starring Sharon D. Clarke as the titular character, casts Caroline in a completely different light. The new poster features a photo of Sharon D. Clarke in the middle of a performance. Clarke, who has played the title character since its revival at the Chichester Festival in 2017, followed by a Hampstead Theatre run and a West End run, plans to reprise her Olivier-winning role on Broadway.<sup>4</sup> The poster features Clarke

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<sup>4</sup> The revival was initially planned to open on Broadway in April, and the show was scheduled to go into previews just the day after the Broadway

standing upright. It is clear she is in the middle of performing 'Lot's Wife' because she is wearing her Sunday dress instead of the white maid's uniform she wears throughout the rest of the performance. Her head is tilted back, with one arm raised in the air; she is singing her heart out. Blue and white stage lighting backlight her, creating a halo-like effect that clearly frames Clarke in a theatrical performance. The image of a powerful diva at a climactic moment in the show depicts unequivocal entertainment, but also captures how Clarke's theatrical labor bleeds into the character, empowering her to ask God to '[t]ear out my heart / strangle my soul / turn me to salt / a pillar of salt / a broken stone' (Kushner 118). While delineating Caroline's character as undefeatable, the image only partially captures the musical's message and the power of spectacularization. On its own, the new promotional material seems to reflect and reiterate the changed attitude toward work since the musical's premier. By stressing the 'show biz' moment of the production, the poster image frames the musical as a glamorous entertainment. Without the transformative power of spectacularization that pries open the gap between the character and actor in the moment of the performance that inform the image, the poster inadvertently collapses the precarious maid with the actor, which, in today's gig economy, is celebrated as flexible and creative. For this reason, the change in the musical's public image points to the urgency and timeliness of investigating labor in theatre, and theatre as a unique and productive site to publicize and interrogate work.

By placing Caroline's work at the center of the stage, *Caroline, or Change* subverts the stereotype of 'mammy' and underscores the Black maid's work as a product of an exploitative capitalist system in the Segregationist South in the 1960s. Through the spectacularization of work, showcasing Caroline and her electronic appliances, the musical

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shutdown was announced to contain the spread of COVID-19. In late March, Roundabout Theatre Company's artistic director and CEO Todd Haimel announced that the show's opening was postponed until fall 2020, but it has since been rescheduled for spring 2021. It is reported that Sharon D. Clarke will stay with the production.

transforms the repetitive, mundane drudgery into an object of public appreciation. The musical's place within the capitalist system and the economy of commercial theatre risks glorifying and romanticizing work, rebranding it as a palatable commodity. Yet the musical reveals theatre as a productive site to theorize about the politics of work, in that individualizing discourse around work can be challenged in public spaces, and layers of work that are increasingly becoming naturalized and invisible in the post-Fordist economy are being brought into sharp focus. Therefore, the spectacularization of work in *Caroline or Change* demonstrates that publicizing the individualizing and normalizing forces of work on stage is, indeed, a political project.

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## **Producing ‘The Joy of Pret’: Theatres of (Emotional) Labour in the Service Industry**

By Jaswinder Blackwell-Pal

### **Abstract**

This article examines the demand for ‘authentic’ emotional performances from employees in service sector workplaces, considering the case of the coffee chain Pret A Manger in particular. Using interview data collected from current employees, alongside my own experiences as a customer in their stores, I show how the demand for what Arlie Hochschild terms ‘emotional labour’ is a cornerstone of Pret’s business model. Whilst employees are implored to ‘just be yourself’ in their interactions with customers, this demand is bound up with an anti-theatrical logic which posits emotional authenticity as something innate to the individual, whilst concealing the very nature of these performances as *work* which is directed and controlled by the employer. I argue that existing literature on these trends has tended to focus on individual performances and experiences, leading to a lack of consideration around the question of managerial and directorial control. I argue that a pivot should be made towards looking at the construction of these performances via directorial and managerial techniques, and furthermore that theatre and performance studies are disciplines well placed to make such contributions, through their interrogation of the notion of ‘authenticity’ in performance and through an increasing interest in questions of theatre and labour.

### **Emotional Labour at the ‘Happiness Factory’**

It is lunchtime on Valentine’s Day 2019 and I walk into a central London branch of the coffee chain Pret a Manger. I approach the cashier, smiling and greeting her in a friendly manner, placing the wrap and chocolate bar I am purchasing on the counter. The cashier, a young woman, picks up my wrap, which is not labelled, turns it over, then over again. I step forward slightly to tell her which one it is. She thanks me and processes the rest of my order. As I am paying, she hands me a Pret ‘Love Bar’ from behind the counter, saying: ‘it’s on the house today’. I thank her and leave, feeling both surprised and grateful as a result of this gift. What I had just experienced was ‘The Joy of

Pret': the term used by the company to refer to its policy of mandating staff to give away a percentage of free food and drink to customers of their choosing each day. This policy, along with Pret's broader approach to customer service, has attracted significant attention in recent years from journalists offering inside accounts of Pret's 'happiness factory' (Moore), examinations of its attempts to 'love-bomb' customers (Noah), and even guides on how to access the elusive free coffees (Petter; Keller; Dalton).

These accounts and investigations of Pret's business practices are often framed by the concepts of emotional or affective labour, with Pret being cited as a paradigmatic example of companies who utilise employees' emotional capabilities and skills as part of the labour process (Myerscough; Noah). Whilst affective labour, most closely associated with theorists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, refers to all work which results in the production of affect rather than physical commodities, *emotional* labour, which I will primarily refer to in this article, refers to the role of emotion within the labour process itself. First coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her ground-breaking 1982 study *The Managed Heart*, emotional labour is defined as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (7). I argue that we can also understand emotional labour as work that requires certain characteristics or traits to be performed before an audience, and by adopting a theatrical lens to examine the business practices of companies such as Pret allows us to develop unique insights into these practices. Specifically in this article, I use Pret as an example of how theatricalisation of labour works in tandem with an explicit anti-theatricality to exploit the emotional skills and capabilities of employees, whilst simultaneously obscuring their connection to the relations of employment. I further argue that a focus on 'authenticity', in both the corporate literature and critical scholarship, diverts from the need to pay careful attention to how these theatricalised encounters are staged, managed, and directed from above.

## **Antitheatrical Behaviour**

Founded in London in 1983, Pret a Manger now boasts over 500 global stores, more than 350 of which are in Britain. The chain, which generates a turnover of over £700 million a year, was sold in 2018 to investment group JAB Holdings for a reported £1.5 billion (Hurst and Onibudo)<sup>1</sup>. On the British high street, Pret has become a ubiquitous presence across major cities, with a carefully constructed image emphasising a commitment towards ethical, organic, and vegetarian food, ongoing work with homeless charities, and the persistently friendly demeanour of their staff. The insistence on the latter point is reiterated in Pret's publicity but also through its recruitment process, training procedures, and management approach, and is even formalised in staff contracts. Alongside 'The Joy of Pret', the company uses a number of other tactics to ensure the friendly demeanour of staff, including the cultivation of a 'Pret Buzz', a specific type of friendly or welcoming atmosphere that each store must replicate through various means, and the use of Mystery Shoppers who arrive each week to monitor the performances of employees and penalise them if service is not fast, clean, or friendly enough. In a series of interviews<sup>2</sup>, employees at Pret stores across London reiterated to me that providing authentic, 'genuinely happy' customer service was a necessary part of the job. One interviewee, reflecting on the recruitment process for the job and what managers looked for, stated '[i]t's more about your character, your type of person. Some people wasn't born to be serving people, but for some people...' while another told me, '[y]ou're not allowed to be scripted on till. You're not allowed. You can't be scripted. It's personality'. The experience of performing emotional labour is therefore intrinsic to work as an

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<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has subsequently resulted in major job losses and business closures across services and hospitality. In August 2020 Pret announced plans to cut 3,000 jobs and permanently close 30 stores nationally.

<sup>2</sup> I conducted a series of semi-structured in-person interviews with 13 Pret a Manger employees between 2018 and 2020, with the agreement of anonymity. I then cross-referenced this data, and used it in conjunction, with 70 anonymous employee reviews available on the website Glass Door.



employee of Pret.

One of the ways in which the company underline these expectations is through explicit directives surrounding behaviour. A previously published list of 'Pret Behaviours', cited in the London Review of Books (Myerscough), outlines a set of standard characteristics that employees are expected to exhibit, as well as those which are prohibited ('Pret Behaviors'). According to this document, the ideal Pret employee is 'genuinely friendly'; 'creates a sense of fun'; 'knows their audience'; and 'has presence'. Conversely, someone who 'does things only for show' is undesirable. The use of theatrical language in this document is positioned alongside the demand for authenticity—there is a clear performative imperative in the expectation to 'create' a certain atmosphere or 'presence', yet the requirement to know one's audience goes hand in hand with doing things out of a 'genuine' desire, and refusing any sense of 'show'. Of course, the formalisation of these behaviours in writing demonstrates that they are very much a requirement of the job.

Such theatrical metaphors, both implicit and explicit, as articulated through Pret's corporate literature and training are not uncommon within the hospitality sector. Danny Meyer, the hugely successful American restaurateur responsible for, amongst others, Union Square Café, Gramercy Tavern and the burger chain Shake Shack, has popularised this approach through his bestselling book *Setting the Table*, where he outlines his approach to 'enlightened hospitality', described as 'putting hospitality to work' (65). Meyer employs the theatrical metaphor when differentiating hospitality from service:

Service is the technical delivery of a product. Hospitality is how the delivery of that product makes its recipient feel [...] Service is a monologue – we decide how we want to do things and set our own standards for service. Hospitality, on the other hand, is a dialogue. (ibid.)

The 51% rule, another cornerstone of his approach, consists of placing majority emphasis on emotional job performance, with the remaining

49% focused on technical excellence and skills (141). Thus, in Meyer's approach, management and employees are encouraged to prioritise the emotional and affective elements of the job over more concrete physical skills or demands. More broadly, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's widely cited article and then book, *The Experience Economy*, explicitly advances this argument, urging managers to consider their businesses as a stage and think of work as theatre (156). The 'Pret Behaviours' exemplify expectations for workers across the service sector, where theatricalization of the workplace and the imperative to bring a performance of authenticity to work is now standard.

This focus on the authentic serves both a financial and ideological function. Positing the ability to provide genuine, happy service as innate to the employee means that they do not have to be trained in, or remunerated according to, the possession of emotional 'skill'. Emotional labour, in this context, is an invisible skill, rendered as something that is the employee's responsibility to carry and cultivate without direct influence from the employer. Simultaneously, the necessity of having these qualities means the employee is compelled to internalise the logic of the company, and subscribe to its mission as they commit their full 'authentic self' to the job.

### **Authenticity, Anti-Managerialism, and Anti-Theatricality**

In an account of the spread of this discourse of authenticity in the modern workplace, Peter Fleming describes the evolution of what he terms 'just be yourself' management. He argues that managerial consultants, particularly in the contexts of the United States and the United Kingdom, now increasingly use authenticity as a reference point for understanding employee motivation and productive performance (2). Fleming characterises this philosophy as inherently contradictory, an attempt by management to solve perennial workplace tensions through an increasing reliance on the incorporation of 'non-work associations', such as markers of identity, lifestyle, or sexuality (7). Authenticity, as espoused by management, is then an attempt to 'solve the problem of

self-alienation and 'cure' the pathologies sustained by workers' as part of management's ongoing interest in 'reconciling the employee to the unpleasant reality of work' (Fleming 3). This management style, which encourages more of the employee's 'non-work existence' to be carried into the productive sphere, coincides with both an increasing demand for emotional labour and a workforce who are able and willing to put their own emotional management skills into the labour market.

While the exhortation to 'just be yourself' emphasises affect and solves some problems for management, it nevertheless creates others. For instance, staff performances require constant monitoring and adjustment—like being in a process of permanent rehearsal, with both colleagues and management providing notes. Whilst one Pret interviewee explained that employees should think of themselves almost as 'game show hosts', others drew attention to the careful balance required from their performances: 'there is such a thing as going too extreme with your customer service and personality' and 'if you're even too loud or too smiley or things, it's like oh this is over the top.' Employees described instances of being told, or telling others, to 'tone down' their showmanship, so the performance seemed more natural and improvised. This is also demonstrated by the banning of rote (scripted) phrases during service: employees must not say 'next please' to customers waiting in line, but choose between a variety of phrases such as 'can I help' or 'are you next'. One interviewee explained, 'you don't shout "next, next, next!" because it's not McDonalds. You don't shout "next!", So you say, "hi can I help?" or "is anybody waiting?" They're very specific. They don't want one word, "next, next".'

I will return to the question of management later on, but it is important to note the instability inherent in these performances, and the need to constantly re-establish the line of demarcation between a suitably authentic persona and an undesirably theatrical one, as articulated by the employees quoted above. Fleming refers to the tendency of 'just be yourself' management to adopt an 'anti-managerial' stance, whereby employees are encouraged to 'voice aspects of personhood once abnegated by corporate managerialism' (2). This

anti-managerialism, as I argue, is also indicative of an anti-theatrical stance which characterises the approach of Pret and other workplaces reliant on the discourse of authenticity. The attention placed on the authentic, genuine performance of selfhood—contrary to the rigid, or fake, ‘doing things only for show’ (‘Pret Behaviors’)—echoes Marvin Carlson’s claims about the negative attributes assigned to theatricality from the 1960s onwards. Carlson argues that theatricality and performance became counterposed as ‘rhetorically oppositional terms’, with performance seen in alignment with the ‘authentic’ or ‘meaningful’ self and theatricality with the artificial, or empty repetition (239-240). By considering the Pret behaviours cited earlier in this article, the effect of this binary framework becomes apparent; the persistent focus on authenticity serving to render explicitly ‘theatrical’ forms of behaviour as unwanted, and demonstrative of artifice.

Nicholas Ridout reaffirms this tendency to bifurcate theatricality and performance in his own account of antitheatricality: ‘[t]heatre is guilty, and knows it, while performance still makes some claim to innocence’ (*Stage Fright* 4). Ridout argues that performance, far from being ‘the paradigm of authentic self-expression’ is in fact ‘an exemplary commodity (it commodifies action, not just things)’ (‘Performance in the Service Economy’ 131), and elsewhere argues that theatre itself is positioned very much within ‘industry’ and capitalist relations, rather than outside of them (cf. *Passionate Amateurs* 6). Theatre offers an experience of work ‘that is not normally experienced as work, but as some kind of nonwork or ‘play’’ (*Passionate Amateurs* 8-9). The integration of non-work elements—such as ‘fun’—and self-identity within the theatricalised service space mirror the same condition. As Fleming notes, ‘the promotion of fun relies upon a symbolic blurring between life and work since the aim is to make the act of production feel as if it is not work at all’ (64). Businesses such as Pret deliberately integrate playful elements (indeed the articles offering tips on how to get free coffee suggest customers are highly engaged in the ‘game’ offered by ‘The Joy Of Pret’). But more crucially, they appeal to employees to willingly bring their genuine, fun, lively personalities

to work also aims to conceal the nature of this practice *as* work, which echoes Ridout's description of theatre as work that strives to be experienced as 'play' instead. Antitheatricality, in this context, works to obscure the social relations of work itself and assist in perpetuating what Fleming identifies as the 'instrumental discourse' of authenticity (5).

Ridout's conclusions about our understanding of theatre as part of the 'real' world of capitalist relations, rather than outside of them, have implications for our understanding of the theatre of labour across commercial stages such as Pret. The theatrical metaphor, which pervades corporate literature for training and publicity as cited earlier, also persists within critical scholarship which examines these business practices. Hochschild's thesis for emotional labour deploys Stanislavskian concepts within her notions of 'deep' and 'surface' acting, arguing that these represent the two strategies available to workers dealing with the emotional pressures of service industry jobs (35). Elsewhere, the dramaturgical model of Erving Goffman is widely cited in studies that attempt to use a theatrical framework for analysing the workplace (Guerrier and Adib 1409; Weaver 8; Lugosi 145; Erickson 88), and autonomist theorists including Paulo Virno have used the performance artist as a reference point for their writing on contemporary labour (cf. 68). In many of these comparisons, however, the actor's labour is cited as a metaphor or merely a symbolic referent for discussions of contemporary work rather than an example in itself. Hochschild, for example, frequently reminds her reader that although she draws heavily from Konstantin Stanislavski, his ideas of theatrical labour is qualitatively different from the forms of commercial emotional labour with which her study is concerned: '[w]e do not think twice about the use of feeling in the theatre, or in psychotherapy, or in forms of group life that we admire' (12) she writes, adding that 'in the world of the theatre it is an honourable art to make maximum use of the resources of memory and feeling in stage performance' (37). Goffman, as Anthony Giddens highlights, also goes to lengths to make clear his dramaturgical model is simply one possible perspective, with its

own limitations (Giddens 291). Like Hochschild, Giddens argues, Goffman counterposes the 'real' of everyday life, to the make-believe and rehearsed theatrical performance (ibid). This distinction between the 'make-believe' of the actor on stage, and the 'real' performative demands of people in the workplace means that this scholarship often risks adhering to the same essentialising tendencies which we see in the corporate literature. An often uncritical adoption of the theatrical metaphor, as seen in Hochschild and Goffman, in which the actor is seen as a figure with unique access to inner emotional authenticity, allows the very notion of this inner authentic self to escape scepticism, as critics have noted. Kathi Weeks has cautioned the need to remember that emotional labour is not only about 'seeming to be but also about his or her coming to be; the work requires not just the use but the production of subjectivity' (241). Elsewhere Guerrier and Adib have noted that the very notion of an 'authentic self' is 'a part of late modern, Western, social discourses' (1401). Examining the theatricalised elements of these labour processes in greater depth than previous scholarship has done, thus allows me to challenge, rather than reinforce, the essentialising notions of authenticity which underpin many of these businesses practices.

### **Centralisation of Gift-Giving**

I have argued that the theatricalisation of labour on display in workplaces such as Pret exists alongside an anti-theatricality, which operates both to naturalise performances which are, in fact, directed and managed according to the company and to mask the skill involved in the work. Those scholars and writers who are interested in close examination of these workplaces can all too easily contribute to the same instrumentalisation, which Fleming identifies, through the rendering of the performative aspects of this labour as something other than work itself. In these examples, the actor's skill is demonstrative of the ability to access inner authenticity. However, I would propose another reading, one which suggests that both employee and actor are in fact engaging

in a more complex process of defining and shaping what constitutes the acceptable public representation of authentic emotional expression. Adopting approaches from theatre and performance studies illuminates some of these issues. As Richard Schechner writes, a performative framework

makes it increasingly difficult to sustain a distinction between appearances and reality, facts and make-believe, surfaces and depths. Appearances are actualities – neither more nor less so than what lies behind or beneath appearances. Social reality is constructed through and through. (19)

Performances at work, in the style of ‘just be yourself’ management, are not the same as life outside of the workplace—they are skilled performances that deserve to be recognised and remunerated as such—but they are no less our social reality by virtue of being performance. Patrick McKelvey, similarly, in a recent piece, refers to *The Managed Heart* to argue that whilst Hochschild may invoke theatre workers ‘only to exclude them’, theatre scholars might find ‘opportunities for critically engaging, or even contesting, the market’s absorption of affect’ through the study of theatrical labour (86). I also suggest that adopting the theatrical lens, and the example of theatrical labour specifically, can offer us further insight, not only into the experience of performing these working personas, but also of the tactics and methods used to elicit them. To consider this further, let me return to the Valentine’s day encounter at Pret outlined at the beginning of this article, which resulted in a free ‘Love Bar’.

As I walk down the street after receiving my free ‘Love Bar’, I begin to question why the cashier offered me the bar, rethinking and retracing each step of the interaction. I initially decided it must be because I assisted her with the name of the sandwich I had chosen. Pret do not label their food products, staff must memorise each item and be able to identify it on sight alone. Helping her with this repetitive and difficult part of her job might have resulted in her giving me something for free. As I cross the road however, I suddenly become aware of the

earrings, in the shape of the heart eyes emoji, which I am wearing, and remember the date. It occurs to me that perhaps she gave me the 'love' bar because it is Valentine's Day and I am wearing something appropriate. I am aware, as a result of my interviews, that Pret regularly assign promotions for particular holidays or events, rewarding customers who are dressed or behave accordingly. Was the free bar the result of my earrings adhering to the Valentine's theme? As I reach my building, doubt begins to set in. I remind myself that I had already bought a chocolate bar as part of my purchase. Why would the cashier give me a second bar, rather than just waive the cost of the one I had picked myself, as I know she had the freedom to do under 'The Joy of Pret' initiative? Why did she have a Love bar on hand behind the counter? As I sit down at my computer, a woman in my postgraduate office turns around and announces to the room 'Pret are giving away a free Love Bar to everyone who pays with a Monzo card today'. I don't have a Monzo card, but I now have a Pret Love Bar. After some momentary confusion I find myself pleased. Perhaps, unlike other customers who have been given a bar because they met the criteria for this particular promotion, I was gifted it for some other reason – be it helping with the product name or the earrings. I begin to think that, unlike the other customer, I was gifted mine because of something I must have done, individually, to warrant it. I feel my love bar is perhaps more deserved, the offering more genuine, the gift more meaningful.

Some months later I have another encounter at Pret which sheds new light on my Valentine's day transaction and highlights why attempts to understand emotional labour exclusively through the framework of personal authenticity fall short. In celebration of 'National Croissant Day', Pret announce across their social media channels that customers visiting between 3pm and 4pm will be given a free vegan jam croissant, as long as they say the password 'Wham Bam Thank You Jam'. At 3.05pm, I enter my nearest Pret, a central London branch, where the line is already some thirty people deep. At the front of the queue, staff are handing out croissants in paper bags to customers, without the password being stated or any verbal interaction taking



place. Eventually, the supply of fresh croissants finishes. A member of staff announces this to the whole store, encouraging us to leave. In the interests of research, I approach the counter regardless and ask if they anticipate making any more. Yes, he says, in about ten minutes. I wait, while a queue forms again behind me. When the majority of customers have given up and left, the staff member again makes an announcement, this time to say there will be precisely eighteen croissants available, the remaining stock, and that customers should count themselves – the nineteenth person in line and everyone behind them being told to leave. The customers oblige, and those of us left are shortly given our croissants. Again, no password is spoken, and little interaction takes place except the passing of the bag.

The centralisation of these offers, with the 'gift' being ordered by head office rather than offered by individual employees, blunts the potential for any 'authentic' display of gift giving management may aspire to as well as disrupting the theatricality of the exchange. In stores that are busy, staff cannot cope with the demand from customers who have seen the promotion announced online and begun to descend in numbers. As a result, staff break from the script, dispensing with key elements (such as the password), in order to alleviate the pressure. Looking back to Valentine's day, it becomes apparent to me that, just as the password, which was never required, the actual display of a Monzo card was probably disregarded by employees in an attempt to speed up the queue and make their day easier. Simply handing a bar to everyone, regardless of their adherence to the promotional 'rules', was a preferable way to manage what had been imposed upon them. This stands in contrast to the 'gift giving' espoused by the Joy of Pret philosophy, which is supposed to involve commitment and choice on the part of the employee. In centralising and standardising these processes, Pret can no longer guarantee they function in the way envisioned. And in the process, they expose the theatricality of their set up.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that scholarship on emotional labour has tended towards

a preoccupation with the question of authenticity, often articulated through the symbolic referent of the actor. This presents two problems for research. Firstly, such a focus can recreate, rather than question, the very notion of an 'authentic' self which underpins corporate attempts to valorise and commodify employees emotional faculties. Secondly, a preoccupation with how authentic, or not, performances at work may be obscures the managerial and directorial dimensions of work. Theatre and performance studies are particularly well placed to address these problems. As disciplines with particular interest in how exterior emotional performances and representations have been shaped throughout history, theatre and performance are well placed to interrogate notions of 'authentic' performances and how these are constructed under varying contexts and conditions. Additionally, thinking about theatrical labour itself, as labour, can be usefully brought into dialogue with the study of such business practice to help move beyond an individualising framework. As my own account illustrates, any discussion of the authenticity, or not, of the employee's feelings in instances of emotional labour becomes secondary to the pressure and control exerted by a management concerned with the careful cultivation of brand image. This draws attention to the inadequacy of any theorisation of emotional labour which is focused primarily on individual experience, rather than considering the workplace as a whole within a larger economic and political context. My experiences and conducted interviews additionally demonstrate the need for labour relations to be foregrounded in scholarship on these issues. My arguments join theatre and performance scholars, including Ridout, McKenzie and others, who have already begun to do this through their work on theatre and labour.

In this article, I adopted an approach of paying specific attention to the application of theatricality in the workplace to show the ways it assists employers to obscure employment relations, allowing them to exploit the emotional capabilities of employees through the use of naturalising tropes around behaviour and personality. Emotional labour at Pret and other workplaces is not solely the result of employees'

individual strategies and techniques for emotion work, but is also the result of the deliberate imposition and management of directorial techniques that cultivate and encourage the types of ‘acting’ required. What we see in the examples I have explored is not the emotional labourer as autonomous actor, but the role of the *director*, through the intervention of management. By indulging Pret’s antitheatricality, we also indulge their anti-managerialism. I drew the curtain on these theatricalised labour processes in order to expose the direction of the encounters, as well as the skills necessary to their performance.

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*Photo Essay*

## **Installing Performances of Spatial Labour**

By Beth M. Weinstein

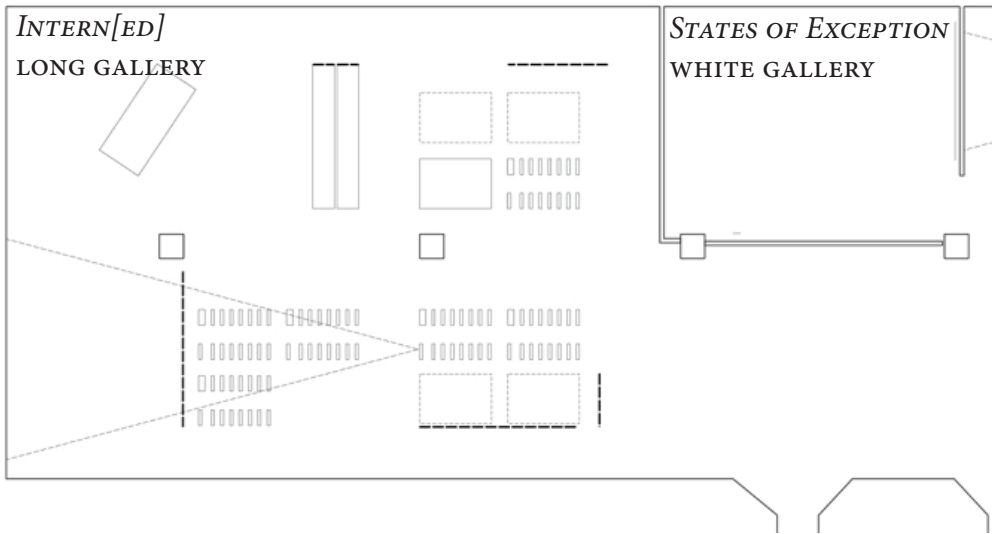
My doctoral examination exhibition titled *Performing Spatial Labour* (2019), and the four performance-installations it assembled, catalysed a praxis of ‘spatial labour’ to render previously invisible labour and spatial conditions not merely knowable, but ‘sensible’ (Rancière). Spatial labour, as developed through my practice-based doctoral research (2016-2020), incorporated architectural practices and building actions related to the ‘making up’, ‘making real’ (Scarry), and making sensible of spatial conditions. I employed architecture’s primary instruments—drawings, models, and texts—reinterpreted performatively to give precedence to the actions that call forth space or produce its ‘(un)becoming’<sup>1</sup>. I leveraged spatial labour to explore invisible spaces and forms of labour (in)activity associated with two sites of internment. The first of these were demolished WWII-era Japanese American internment camps in the US where internees wove camouflage nets, fabricated scale models, and moulded bricks. The second was the razed Centre d’Identification de Vincennes (CIV), a detention centre in Paris from the Algerian War period used to prevent the interned from working.

The exhibition immersed visitors in a multisensory milieu that choreographed their forensic<sup>2</sup> (Gibson, Weizman) labour to make sense of the (in)visibilities within and of architectures of interment as evident in the four exhibited performance-installations: *Intern[ed]*, *States of Exception*, *Palimpsest* and *Razing Manzanar II*. While the exhibition spatialised traces of these performance-installations, it also hid material, embodied, and affective labour, including acts needed for the exhibition’s (un)becoming—orchestrating, sourcing, procuring, forming, assembling, and recycling materials. The labour itself was obfuscated by its visible outcomes. Yet it was through not only the visible evidence of past labours, but also the visitors’ more-than-visual experience of the exhibition and their embodied detective work that the camps’ recurrence and invisible-ised labourers became sensible.

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1 I define ‘(un)becoming’ as both the less-than-beautiful quality of things or spaces when coming apart and, through parentheses inflecting this and other terms, recurrent oscillations between states.

2 Drawing upon Eyal Weizman and Forensic Architecture’s practices, ‘forensic’ practices include seeking and uncovering truths, engaging artefacts’ expressive potential, and bringing evidence to the *forum* (Forensic 746-8). In Gibson’s practice, the gallery visitor is a ‘forensic audience... looking to construct a worldview’ (104-5) and a viewer-investigator in motion (135-6).

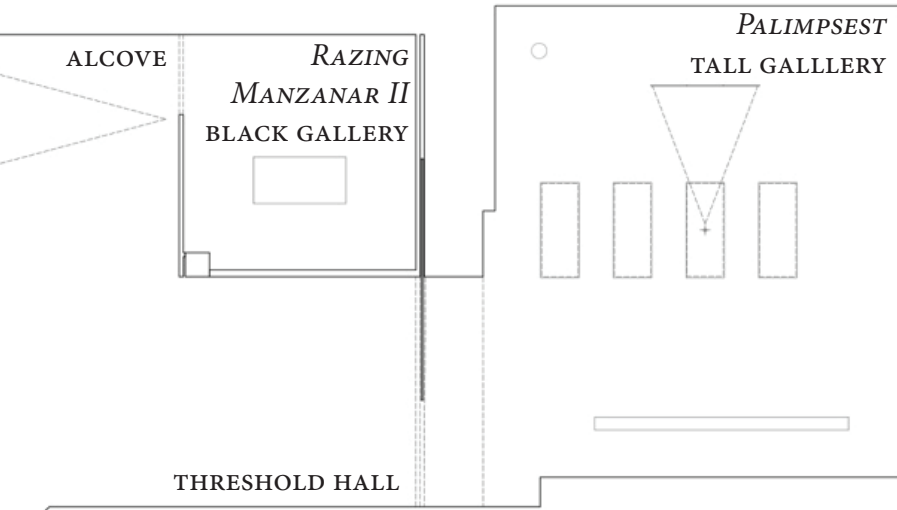


## *Spatialising Traces*

The Plimsoll Gallery's 'dumb-bell' configuration, with its 'long' and 'tall' galleries at opposing ends of a linear hall, afforded a spatial opposition between my explorations of the US internment camps, where internees wove camouflage, moulded bricks, and fabricated scale models (*Intern[ed]*), and of the CIV, where Algerian labourers were detained and restrained from working (*Palimpsest*). The placing, spacing, and scaling of objects and images in the gallery cued visitors' viewing—from afar or nearby, frontally, obliquely, or from above.

Threshold hall: The hall thickened the transition from the outside world to the four distinct gallery atmospheres, and highlighted the contrasting spatialities and content at opposing ends. Its darkness brought entering visitors to stillness; a pause necessary for eyes, ears, and other senses to adjust. Within this unlit space, I provided three benches for resting; these afforded places apart in which to process and make sense of what had been sensed.

*Intern[ed]*: I leveraged the long gallery's expansiveness as an analogue to the western US's vast landscapes. A discontinuous 'text-ile' enclosure suggested the porous fence-line of the camouflage-camps. This enclosed area housed camp scale-models in varying states of (un)becoming, plus tools and traces from the paper brick/barrack scale-model production. Projected video of on-site actions contrasted in scale to medium and tiny screens revealing video-documentation of an off-site performance.



**Fig. 1:** Plan

*Performing Spatial Labour*, Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart, 2019

*Palimpsest:* In contrast to the seeming emptiness of the long gallery, I filled the tall gallery, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere. A series of floating obstacles—suspended chambers of *notes blanches*, a screen, column, and light-box—obligated visitors' circumambulation to mentally assemble fragmented forms of evidence. Visitors needed to pry their way into the bed-sized chambers to make sense through other senses.

*States of Exception:* I used the thin wall separating the alcove and white gallery to support two distinct protagonists' views of a performed erasure—the interior elevation as architect's view and the exterior as witness' view. Visitors moved between the white gallery as analogue for the performance work site in which hyper-visible labour and its associated equipment were exposed and the alcove, with its bench, analogous to the comfortable place from which the audience observed the (dis)appearing labour in the original performance.

*Razing Manzanar II:* In this smallest and darkest gallery, I installed a table on which an erasure is/was/will be performed—the projected footage of one past erasure and the physical traces of another. A patch of projected light, approximately the size of a drawing, was the only illumination in the space. It beckoned visitors towards the table and the scratching sound it emitted. Chairs at both ends of the table marked places of absent labourers.



RAZING MANZANAR II



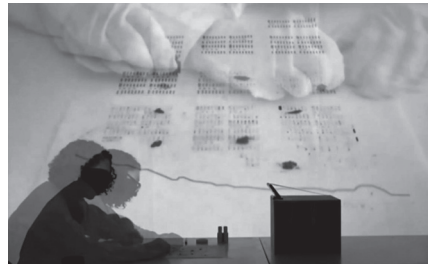
## Moving between Protagonists' Perspectives

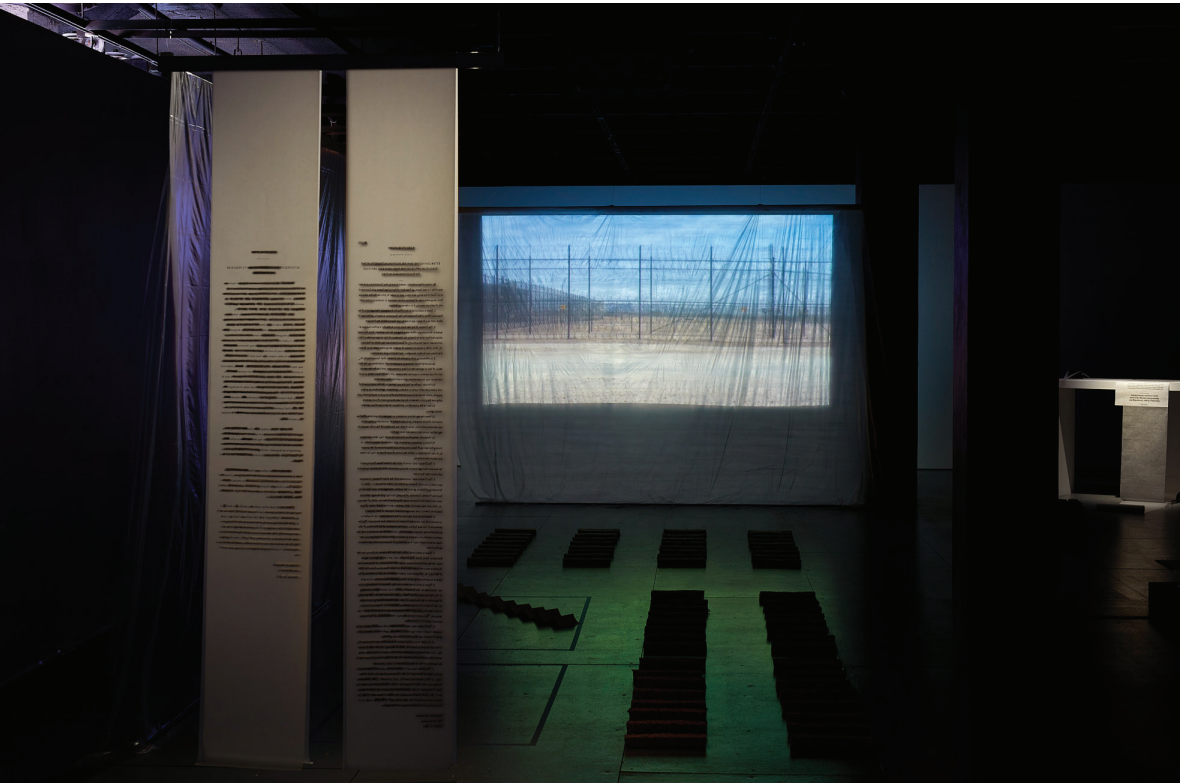
In order to make sense of the building, modification, and demolition of the camouflage-camps and the CIV, plus the labour (in)activity occurring there, first necessitated my own and then the visitors moving between vantage points. These vantage points were those of distinct protagonists who represented, drew, photographed, and scribed their own renditions of the camps.

- Government agents who called forth these US and French camps. They spoke through executive order texts, master plan drawings, and aerial, oblique, and surveillance camera photography.
- Architects and builders of the camps. They communicated through orthographic projection drawings, annotations, and specifications.
- Witnesses surrounding the camps. US citizens in the 1940s and French humanitarian aid workers and journalists in the 1960s recounted what they saw and heard from nearby in reports and snapshots.
- The interned themselves who journaled their embodied experiences from ground level.

Each protagonist and their perspective informed the dispositive and documentation of the original performance-installations. These were then made present again in *Performing Spatial Labour* through spatial and choreographic strategies (viewing and moving hovering/around/outside/inside) and atmospheric qualities of sound (repetitive/insidious/punctuating/haunting) and darkness (pin-pointed and glowing light). In the four galleries, the visitor performed the labour of connecting the dots, moving through and embodying each protagonist's vantage point, including that of the fifth protagonist—the artist-researcher.

For example, the video *Razing Manzanar II* contained each of these protagonists, modes of representation, and their entangled relations. *Razing Manzanar II*'s installation spatialised these relations anew. The visitor-witness aggregated the evidence seen in perspective; the architect's orthographic drawing (plan) was seen on the table from above; the intern[ed]—invisible in the room, silhouetted in the video—laboured to erase the drawing of the camp. The government's view dominated the scene, surveilling the original act as if from a low flying plane. Through these perspectives in the video and their re-spatialised relations in the installation, visitors navigated between vantage points.





## *Choreographing Forensic Labour*

The placing, spacing, and design of installation components set up choreographic cues and clues. They solicited visitors' movement across, around, inside, and over objects and spaces. Objects' scales and placements either beckoned visitors to approach or demanded that they step back for an overview.

In *Intern[ed]*, for instance, a large projection held visitors at the edge, as if stopped at the fence. A text-tile in-the-making then interpellated them, to cross to the opposite corner of the 'camp'. Once there, a new path revealed itself, suggesting movement from viewing the tiny 'surveillance' video playing on a propped-up iPhone to the aerial view appearing on a ground-level monitor.

### INTERN[ED]



Gallery visitors performed the labour, yet this was neither the labour of drawing nor erasing, building nor unbuilding models, neither scribing nor whiting-out texts seen in the presented evidence. Rather, this labour was navigating an immersive milieu and constructing relations between fragments—detective work. These fragments included: spatial elements such as text-iles and models; photographic images and video representations in various scales and platforms; and non-visually sensed information, such as luminous and sonic atmospheres.



Photos: Left page and Right page, upper right: Rémi Chauvin;  
Right page, upper left and below: Peter Angus Robinson.

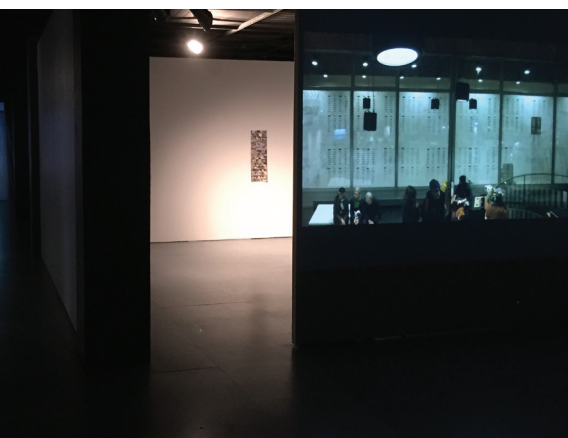


### *Atmospheric Sensing: Light*

Whilst darkness, and the contemplative state it cultivates, was a general rule of the exhibition, I brightly lit a few elements to prompt alertness. This included highlighting evidence of *States of Exception's* hyper-visible labour: the witness view of the camp pattern erasure on the building facade, the 'embodied labourer's' (body-camera) view accessible via QR code, and the tools themselves.



## STATES OF EXCEPTION



Within *Intern[ed]*, only a few elements were brightly lit, stating ‘Watch out!’: an executive order coming-into-being and the whited-out text-iles of the discontinuous enclosure.

In contrast, in *Palimpsest*, carbon-transferred wall texts authored by witnesses who had entered the CIV hid in a barely detectable glow.

Photos: Left page, above: Rémi Chauvin; below: Peter Angus Robinson; Right page, above: Rémi Chauvin; below: Beth Weinstein

## *Atmospheric Sensing: Sonic*

Sonic elements of the exhibition transported environmental qualities of the internment camp sites and actions performed there to the 'non-site' of the installation (Smithson). These rhythmic sounds made present the labours of absent humans and made palpable the recurrence of the camp as a condition.

The windy soundscape of the US camouflage-camps was felt through a pervasive low rumble (*Intern[ed]*). This vibration was occasionally punctuated by percussive sounds of making and unmaking models: wood elements hitting pavement and paper bricks scraping against concrete slabs seen in the situated videos. Wandering the exhibition, the rhythmic sounds of building and unbuilding impressed upon visitors' minds and bodies.

At the head of floor-level mattresses in *Palimpsest*, three pillows murmured. The layered voices beckoned one down to the ground. This cued a visitor to investigate further; a labour of sifting through murky words to find gems of meaning. Once reclined on a mattress, where a visitor discovered the scent of straw, their mobile task came to a stand-still, adopting the embodied position of the too-idle Algerian internee-labourer.



PALIMPSEST

*Photo Essay: Installing Performances of Spatial Labour*



Photos: above: Rémi Chauvin; below: Peter Angus Robinson.



### *(In)Visiblising Labour*

Throughout the exhibition, video documentation revealed (spatially and temporally) remote labours by which my camp renditions oscillated between visibility and invisibility. However, the live labour involved in the exhibition's (un)becoming was absent. Only that of the gallery visitor was present.

And at the same time, the very human, imperfect labours that constituted *Performing Spatial Labour* and the camps they evoked were evident in the sheer material quantities of the installation: layers upon layers of corrugated board forming the floating light box, the hundreds of paper brick/barrack scale-models and their moulds, hundreds of *notes blanches* with thousands of irregular perforations and thousands of clips holding them together. These details were not hidden, but hovered at the 'threshold of detectability' (Weizman) inviting gallery visitors to perform detective work with their fingertips, ears, noses, and bodies.

### PALIMPSEST





*Making sense as a body in space*



*walking, standing, leaning,  
straining, resting, reclining,  
looking, focusing, listening,  
smelling, touching, holding,  
and feeling vibrations.*



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Notes from the Field

## Work | Strike | Dance: The Paris Opera Ballet and the 2019 Pensions Dispute

By Martin Young



**Fig. 1:** Paris Opera dancers perform in front of the Palais Garnier against the French government's plan to overhaul the country's retirement system, in Paris, on December 24, 2019. (Photo by Ludovic Marin/AFP via Getty Images).

The day before Christmas Eve 2019, 27 of the Paris Opera's ballet dancers, alongside a large contingent of the orchestra, staged a 15 minute excerpt of *Swan Lake* on the front steps of the Palais Garnier. This performance was part of a wave of strike action by French workers against major proposed pension reforms which had, since the start of December, already seen the closure of schools, rail networks, and attractions like the Eiffel Tower, and drawn hundreds of thousands of people into taking part in protests in the streets. As reports of the labour dispute, which would become the longest running strike in France's history, spread around the world, footage of the *Swan Lake* performance gained a disproportionate prominence, circulating virally as one of the

key emblematic images of the action. That ballet dancers might become the avatars of struggling workers, and that workers' struggle might become the perspective through which to view a ballet performance, is an unexpected situation to say the least. As Lester Tomé writes, ballet is 'a high-art tradition commonly characterized as elitist and escapist, seemingly antipodal to Marxist principles' (6). What, then, is at stake in the reception and circulation of this performance?

One question is the inclusion of ballet dancers within an aggrieved working class. The entry level pay for these dancers is around €35,000 a year, just shy of the French average salary of €35,856, with the leading stars paid far more.<sup>1</sup> However, although the dancers were among the more privileged of France's striking workers, in absolute terms they stood to lose the most from the changes. Prior to the reforms, they were able to retire at the age of 42, meaning that the government's proposal to impose a universal pension plan on all workers with a harmonised retirement age of 64 confronted them with a two-decade extension of their working lives. The opera's specialised pension scheme, which also saw singers retire between the ages of 50 and 57 and technicians between 55 and 62, had evolved from a provision initially established in 1698 as part of a Royal Privilege granted by Louis XIV (Semmens 56-7).

If this august historical lineage, which was widely repeated in news reports of the protest, aligns the dancers with the indulgences of elite culture, deploying the conservation of heritage against a modernising government, it cannot completely distract from the fact that the labour process these workers are subject to—dancing—is one which imposes intense stress and degradation on the body. Dancer Héloïse Jocqueviel told a journalist

We start classical dance at the age of 8. By our late teenage years, we're getting recurring injuries ... Once you reach the age of 42, you're already suffering from

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<sup>1</sup> These figures were reported during the dispute, prior to the effects of coronavirus (Mainwaring).

arthritis, stress fractures, hernias and in some cases titanium hips. It's hard to maintain a level of excellence until 42, but 64 seems impossible. (Lough)

Her words evidence the observation made by dance ethnographer Dunja Njaradi that dancers 'view their profession as 'body work'', and that many ballet dancers describe their work using 'exclusively corporeal terms: pain, exhaustion, muscle strains, etc' (149). The question of a retirement age, in other words, brings into sharp focus a fundamental aspect of how dancers understand their experience.

Recognising these dancers as workers runs counter to the formal conventions of ballet itself as it is presented to audiences. Priya Srinivasan writes that 'In the aesthetic realm, audiences are trained not to see the labor of dance, but they are still consumers of that effort' (12). Ballet is strenuous work arranged to make itself appear effortless. Dancers must maintain extremely high standards of physical fitness and discipline, their work requiring great strength, flexibility, and mental concentration and entailing a high risk of injury. And yet through its formal gracefulness, ballet offers audiences a vision of the human body transcending its seeming limitations. If dance is among the most corporeal of artforms, traditional ballet arguably does the most to obscure and conceal the realities of bodily exertion. By seeming to show movement without acknowledging sweat, breathlessness, exhaustion, injury, or even the constraints of gravity, ballet brackets itself off from the world of material necessity and consequence. In other words, the principles of ballet's aesthetic form are at odds with recognising the fact of labour.

In an account of ballet dancers in the revolutionary Cuba of the 1970s visiting factories to stage performances for the workers, Lester Tomé writes that

Regarding dancers as workers meant recognizing the labor of ballet and, more specifically, equating the profession's hard physical demands with the arduous activities through which manual workers fueled production. (6)

These performances were part of a deliberate political strategy by the

socialist government to make dancers more immediately visible as workers and so incorporate them within a unified national proletariat. Something comparable, if less revolutionary, was implicitly being attempted in Paris. The dancers affirmed their status as workers according to very traditional criteria (hard physical graft and ‘body work’) and also asserted through their inclusion a broadened conception of work and workers.

Tomé writes of these factory performances by ballet dancers in Cuba that

up close observation of the artists revealed palpable evidence of strenuous labor—effort that, in a conventional theatrical venue, is masked by lights, makeup, and costumes and is minimized by the distance between the audience and the stage. (10)

On the drizzly stone steps under the cold December sun, and in the subsequent digital circulation of the images, a similar demystification was rendered possible. There is, therefore, something fundamentally compromising in the picket line performance, which announces so boldly the extent to which ballet is an act of work. The nature of the event, which conspicuously draws its audience’s attention to the mundane details of an industrial dispute, firmly punctures any spectatorial illusion or escapism. To struggle over pensions is to say ‘this is work that I do, and I do it for pay, but I cannot do it forever. My body is finite’.

In another statement to journalists after the performance, Jocqueviel affirmed that the dance was a protest against the government but went on to suggest that it was

also a gesture towards spectators because we as artists are very sorry for what is happening to hundreds of people who are deprived of seeing Christmas shows. (France24)

The fact that the dancers refused to comply with their duties *as workers* did not mitigate the calling they felt *as artists*. A crucial aspect of the performance, which seemingly accounts for a significant degree

of its appeal and viral popularity, is that it holds the promise of performance liberated from commerce. One of the tensions inherent in the performance is that it encourages its spectators to recognise dance as work and the dancers as workers precisely at a moment when they were in principle withdrawing their labour. To mention this is not to accuse them of crossing a picket or undermining the industrial action by staging this performance, but rather to draw attention to the question of how dance signifies as work not only in its physical activity but in its formal organisation—dance is organised into performances according to workplace requirements and performances are scheduled and regulated by contracts and motivated by budgetary concerns. A performance is not only an act of labour, it is a shift. This picket line protest therefore offers the prospect that we might do away with both the obfuscating accoutrements of scenery and lighting and the market apparatus of box office ticketing, and instead stage the dance as an unmediated, non-commercial interaction between those who wish to perform and those who wish to spectate. Even as the performance draws conscious attention to the dancers' status as workers, it also offers a kind of prefigurative ideal of performance liberated from being work.

And yet, even shorn of its theatrical embellishments and commercial status, the dance does not lose its cultural aura. Where the dancers have sacrificed their prestigious stage, the august facade of the Opera House provides an even more grandiose setting. Above the black and gold wrought iron gates of the entrance archways, between carved reliefs of Pergolesi and Haydn hung a hand painted banner that read 'OPERA de PARIS GREVE', and between Haydn and Cimarosa 'la culture en Danger'.<sup>2</sup> The claim, signalled through this second banner slogan, that the striking opera workers were the defenders of an imperiled culture (or that the Paris Opera should be taken as a figurehead for 'culture' in the abstract) underscores an orthodox and conservative undercurrent which identifies the continuity of ballet's

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<sup>2</sup> 'Paris Opera strike', 'culture under threat'. Translation from French was done by author.

aesthetic and cultural traditions as an aim of the strike. Classical ballet performers, in their pristine white leotards and tutus, represent, on the one hand, the kind of opulent leisure activity that the working class is routinely denied access to, and on the other a set of conservative cultural values which a radical working class militancy might seek to abolish, or at least to displace from its authoritative position. While it seems, in line with Tomé's writing, that this performance invited audiences to recognise both the activity of work and the condition of workers within an elite art form, it also gave onlookers the opportunity to champion bourgeois aesthetics and sensibilities within a proletarian movement. It became possible to regard the involvement of dancers, and the elite culture which they represent, as elevating the industrial action.

Spectacle and theatricality were by no means absent from the wider pensions struggle. People took to the streets in vibrant protest, incorporating banners, flags, props, and costumes, setting off fireworks, flares, and smoke bombs, building and burning barricades, and graffitiing slogans around their cities. Firefighters in full uniform set themselves alight and violently confronted the cops. These raucous and heavily policed demonstrations, constituting at times a continuation of the insurrectionary *gilets jaunes* and *gilets noirs* protests of earlier in the year, provide the context against which a performance of *Swan Lake* appears as a corrective, perhaps even redemptive, injection of classical elegance and grace. It garnered praise in the course of its viral circulation for making the workers' struggle beautiful, but it did so by reinforcing orthodox conventions of aesthetic beauty. If there is something implicitly Brechtian in the gesture of presenting dancers as organised workers in neutral daylight without the mediation of the theatrical apparatus, the contradiction between the delicate music of Tchaikovsky's Romantic score and the urban soundscape of crowds and traffic it competed with serves to heighten the sense of irreconcilable contradiction. The ballet's escapist qualities are reinforced, and the performance reads as a rare glimpse into a world of taste and refinement. In the juxtaposition between the dance and the riots with which it was theoretically in sympathy, the sense that the art transcends the base



material and political demands of both the market and the strike, and constitutes a kind of benevolent gift to culture-starved spectators, is hard to shake.



**Fig. 2 and 3:** Paris Opera Dancers perform at home as part of the lockdown video circulated by the Paris Opera via social media. Screenshots from YouTube, 5 August 2020.

Four months after the strike performance, at the height of the coronavirus lockdown, with the Palais Garnier once again standing empty, a new video of the Paris Opera dancers circulated online. In this video, a tribute to ‘those who work with dedication and courage to protect us’, dancers performed remotely, isolated in their homes.<sup>3</sup> With dancing filmed in kitchens and living rooms, on beds and in bathtubs, set against a section of Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*, this video brought the ballet’s disciplined body movements and lavish music into dialogue with the domestic sphere, rather than the sphere of industrial action. If it posits a kind of jubilant resistance to the tedium and confinement of working from home, it does not make the same assertion of worker subjectivity that the *Swan Lake* performance did. Instead, the dance is once again a beautiful and redemptive gift, an expression of human

<sup>3</sup> Original: ‘à tous ceux qui travaillent avec dévouement et courage pour nous protéger’ (@balletoperadeparis). Translation from French was done by author.

warmth and connectedness; not the execution of highly disciplined and ultimately injurious labour, but a performative display of good will. The video's unseen dedicatees, workers in the health and care sector, food distribution workers, emergency workers, and so on, provide the terms for the performance. It is in appreciation of their ongoing labour, so essential to the maintenance of social function, that the dancers dance—not as fellow participants in the class struggle, but as the beneficiaries of work done.

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## **Institutional Care and the Feminine Aquatic: An Interview with Shona Macnaughton**

By Angeliki Roussou and Shona Macnaughton

*Aquatic Needs*, a performance by the Scottish artist Shona Macnaughton, was commissioned by the Cooper Gallery (Dundee, UK) to take place at the one-day symposium, ‘12-hour Non-State Parade’, that accompanied Jasmina Cibic’s exhibition *The Pleasure of Expense* in November 2019. A panel of speakers was finishing up taking questions from the audience when Macnaughton took the floor from her seat among other symposium attendees: ‘I don’t actually have a question. I never have a question. My heart starts pounding and I want to speak but there’s a gap between how intelligent I think I am and how intelligent I sound. Will you look after me?’<sup>1</sup> Her monologue mourned the ‘values we used to share’ as well as the sacrifice of our ‘individual freedom’. She soon stood up and faced the audience: ‘[w]ill you look after me? The Cooper Gallery has diminished your role. I want to help you help yourselves and others. Watch yourselves closely to see when you’re ready to help. Not me—yourselves’. Macnaughton then revealed her full costume that displayed year dates—1980, 2000 and 2019—which gave cues to her scripts’ textual references. Although these dates alluded to election campaign manifestos of British political parties (Conservative, Labour and SNP) and health literature on post-childbirth incontinence, miscarriage, and toilet training from the UK National Health Service, the exact sources were not decipherable during the performance.

Moving slowly towards the room’s exit, Macnaughton’s words echoed both as responsibility disclaimers and semi-patronising guidance: ‘If you don’t want to sit there that’s fine, I will never force you or restrain you to sit there. We all have the odd accident from time to time, if we’re excited, upset, or absorbed in something else.’ The audience was eventually enticed awkwardly, ambivalently and somewhat comically

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<sup>1</sup> Macnaughton kindly shared her performance script with me after I attended the symposium.

to follow Macnaughton outside the symposium hall, where she spoke through a megaphone. She kept urging and advising in a similar tone—an odd mix of political campaign speech and health literature—as the performance continued down the stairs and into the ground-floor gallery hall. The final scene took place outside the front of the gallery. Her monologue climaxed as she stood up on a low wall around a planted area and pointed a torch at the audience standing in front of her:

Talent and genius are uniformly distributed. Opportunity is not. This means that you will have trouble controlling yourselves. Part of becoming women is dealing with embarrassing mishaps. We understand the concept of aspiration. It may leak out at any time when you're under pressure when you cough or laugh.

Macnaughton started laughing, flashed a torchlight on her crotch where her costume displayed the year 2020, and urinated on herself. She announced that 'in no other relationship do we place ourselves so unreservedly and wholeheartedly at the disposal of other people'. She ended the performance pleading: '[w]hen it happens stay calm and reassure me'.

By juxtaposing references to institutional care (understood as forms of art-institutional support to art workers) and forms of labour relating to motherhood, *Aquatic Needs* illustrates artistic labour in tandem with gendered facets of what Kathi Weeks has referred to as 'postmodernity's subsumption of life into work' (107). The latter condition denotes subjectification or subject-making as a process that has internalised capitalist work ethics to the point of absolute intimacy, even though this process extends beyond the narrowly defined workplace. Macnaughton's performance evokes a gendered liquid physicality and leakiness associated with the post-childbirth and aging female body. Alongside its allusions to state-public-citizen relations and art-institutional policy, *Aquatic Needs* apprehends and explores entwined aspects of motherhood and artistic labour through often-eschewed correlations of our crises-ridden neoliberal condition: gendered psychosomatic and authorial mishaps; care, confidence, and

obligation within art-institutional structures; and the physical and emotional labour in motherhood-child relations.

I initiated this interview with Macnaughton as a written conversation through emails in early March 2020, after having attended *Aquatic Needs*.



**Fig. 1:** Shona Macnaughton in *Aquatic Needs*. A performance commissioned for 12-Hour Non-State Parade, Cooper Gallery, DJCAD, Dundee, 2019. Photo: Sally Jubb, @sallyjubbphotography

Angeliki Roussou (AR): *Your practice has tended to explore linguistic/discursive crossovers between art-institutional structures and creative labour, as well as themes such as motherhood / childhood care relations and affective labour. How has your performance shifted in terms of the emotional labour you are putting into it?*

Shona Macnaughton (SM): I have shifted primarily into live performance since motherhood. Since becoming a mother, I spent most available emotional labour on caring for others: mopping up waste, cleaning muck off materials, and managing fluids and the emotions of others. This base-ness that came from looking after small children was a fundamental shift from a pre-parenthood condition in which I

spent more time using intellectual capacities. Alongside this was a new sense of time due to my responsibility to a child who needs me to be in the present moment. This sense of the abject and being present has translated well into live performance. Since the focus of my emotional labour has necessarily been about the survival of my child, I have tried to channel the experience of this directly into my work. My observations of the performance of the gendered mother role have incorporated into my work considering my role as an artist within institutional structures. Through reflecting on how the commissioning process works in arts institutions such as galleries, being 'employed' by the institution to make new work, and how that relationship is one of dependency, I have created work that speaks through these juxtapositions. For example, in the work *We Nurture* (2019) for Collective Gallery, I performed a script using that institution's promotional text, which included words of care and inclusivity from the gallery towards its audiences. I performed as myself as the artist/employee/care-worker dispensing advice whilst giving a tour of the institution to a live audience.

Being an artist and a mother and a worker have seemed like opposing faces on a prism of labour. They are all labour in the sense that they all contribute to the cycle of value in capitalism, whether paid or unpaid. But I'm concerned with their differing affects; or put simply, how different I feel doing these labours in terms of levels of alienation, autonomy, and love. In the past, I made work that tried to reconcile the condition of paid dead-end work propping up the free (or nominally paid) labour of my art. For example, in the video performance work *Adverts for the workplace = 48p* (2010), I perform to camera during my work as a cleaner. In this there was a binary distinction between two forms of labour: artistic and employed.

Since parenthood, I moved on to consider what I think of as a third labour of childcare within my artwork. Such work collapses these modes of labour in on each other in order to point to their interdependences, but also their incompatibility. In the performance *Arms Length Government Body* (2016), I used my emotional labour of caring for my child whilst concurrently trying to maintain an artistic

practice. My tone of speaking to a child was juxtaposed against language from arts institutions and directed to an adult audience during the performance. For example, I would say: 'Right time for a drink then. [*Offer breast to audience*] You don't want it tonight? It is our mission to place the artist, viewer, user, and participant at the heart of all our activities? No? Not tonight?'

Similarly, in *Aquatic Needs*, artistic labour is made proximal to the labour of motherhood through the way the script is written:

What I want for my own children, I want for yours. [...]  
I should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with you. [...] You will leak during forceful activities. I will unleash the potential. You will leak during less strenuous activities like bending over.

The expected role of the audience is conflated with the child, post-childbirth mother, and subject of the state to be nurtured, moulded, and instructed. But the main focus of this work is the by-product of toil: how the female body is affected physically by emotional labour.

*AR: How do the physicality and leakiness in Aquatic Needs or the feminine aquatic quality you seem to perform frame artistic or other forms of labour (emotional or physical)?*

*SM:* When thinking about my own body as the primary material visible within the performance, I had the content and form of the performance reflect that reality. I am a female body reaching middle age. I realised that for someone like me born in 1983, my growth has roughly paralleled the neoliberal state in the UK: the deregulation of the markets; the weakening of labour bargaining; the de-collectivisation of the workplace. These were measures put in place to increase the flow of capital and to raise levels of debt and liquidity. How could the performance and my body (the artist's body) within it, echo a trajectory of neoliberal mucosity? If financial liquidity is about how assets can quickly convert and how speedily something can perform transference, then how could the growing imperative for efficient flow be represented

by the female body? How could the liquid metaphor be brought back to its literal representation within the body?

The framework of the performance aligned to both the chronological development of political manifestos from the 1980s to the impending 2019 elections and concurrently the stages a female body would have gone through over that period in relation to its liquids. So, the text in the first section of the script, which took place in the banked seating area and gallery of the Cooper Gallery, was from Margaret Thatcher's 1979 manifesto which set up the nascent period of financial liquidity of the 1980s. This was combined with text relating to being a child and teenager, as I gave instructions and advice related to toilet training and getting a period. The next section of the performance that took place on the stairwell linked Tony Blair's manifesto from 1997 to text which might relate to a young adult's experience of being female, including informative advice around smear tests, abortion, and pelvic floor exercises. The final section of the performance took place on the ground floor and outside the building, where the script combined 2019 UK election manifestos with text about the aging and/or post childbirth body, including incontinence and miscarriage.

Whilst I was developing this performance, I read Astrida Neimanis' post-human rereading of Luce Irigaray who states:

For Irigaray, feminine bodies are fluid, both figuratively in their non-subsumability into a masculine paradigm and literally in their genital mucosity, their placental interchanges, and their amniotic flows. This leakiness is what makes woman always a woman-to-come. (78)

This interpretation proffers the opposite of the essentialist readings of fixed gender, which are often levelled against Irigaray. In the performance, this sense of fluidity—as a characteristic of the feminine in itself—and the idea of leaking—as the feminine being able to seep through, evading capture—shown in the actions and references to the body is differentiated from a sense of neoliberal fluidity of the circulation of capital and the ideas from political rhetoric in the manifestos. The performance is played out in a gallery—a realm of art—and I perform



as myself—an artist asking a question in a symposium. Myself, the performer and artist, is a conduit joining liquidity as flow and liquidity as leak.

My artistic labour is instructive as a cipher between these two conditions. Marina Vishmidt describes the exception of artistic labour when deployed in a way to obfuscate the nature of work in (late) capitalism. '[T]he valorisation of creativity is a mode of producing subjectivity that aligns the interests of workers with the speculative nature of capital, a way of installing speculation at the most intimate levels of subjective existence' whereas the classic wage relation can be separated from the individual (26). The subjective crux which binds individuals to work readiness—called 'generalised creativity' (Vishmidt 20)—is the character background for playing the 'artist' role within *Aquatic Needs*. In the final scene of the performance, the climax of these conditions seen in the 2019 manifestos—the imperative for 'aspiration'—leaks out. I inform the audience:

Talent and genius are uniformly distributed. Opportunity is not. Part of becoming women is dealing with embarrassing mishaps. We understand the concept of aspiration. It may leak out any time when you're under pressure, when you cough or laugh [*peeing, torch down*]. In no other relationship do we place ourselves so unreservedly and wholeheartedly at the disposal of other people. When it happens stay calm and reassure me.

The literal physical leakiness is framed as a by-product of the emotional labour involved in creating the very performance work in hand. I'm laughing. I release urine. It visibly seeps through. It is a relief but the act also holds a general disgust, which then returns the relationship between audience and performer to one of necessary care.

*AR: How does Aquatic Needs understand care (collective or individual) and care labour in art and motherhood in relation to the nature of work in late capitalism and, in particular, the condition of 'generalised creativity' and work readiness?*

SM: At this point in late capitalism, the neoliberal economy has been able to co-opt our care for one another into its value circulation. But alongside this very process, aspects of care will evade capture into neoliberal values. The form of *Aquatic Needs* is essentially a re-framing of the co-optations of care.

‘Will you take care of me?’ The initial question seems to be from a member of the audience who then becomes the performer. It addresses first of all the institution, then the panel and the wider audience. This question and my transitioning role intentionally instigate an unstable relationship to the paternal institution, introduces the performer as dependent, and undermines the performance in performance. If we continue the previous analogy: these are the holes in the performance that make a leak.

I become further vulnerable—dependent and on my own—when the audience doesn’t follow my instructions. The instructional text comes from the public health advice and takes an authoritative tone. But it also translates into actions I perform, allowing the bodily text to refer to my body and the bodies within the audience which undermines that authority:

On a breath out, pull up and in and squeeze. [*Squeeze the banister*] Sharing values and purpose, where merit comes before privilege—Trying to hold on increases the amount you can cope with—squeeeeee. This will help any swelling, bruising or tears—squeeze. The vision is one of renewal, an audience with drive, purpose and energy.

My instruction to the audience and my demonstration of squeezing the staircase banister combine with the declamatory style of the political rhetoric. Through this, I attempt to transform these (in this case) Blairite ideas of classless individual aspiration into a personal mantra made intersubjective and physical. This, in turn, points to a collectivity of self-care as distinct yet embroiled within the neoliberal exploitation of the term (i.e. self-care) in which ‘me time’ is distinct from, yet akin to, self-care in the black feminist sense of self-preservation in an environment hostile to your identity.

AR: *Could you elaborate on how the sense of the abject you've mentioned relates to the aforementioned conditions and forms of labour?*

SM: The feminine aquatic is a different kind of flow to the circulative. It is an abject non-productive flow, like the leak of aspiration in the performance. For instance, when looking at artistic-political discussions about how the state has de-collectivised our psychology (neoliberal political rhetoric) through theories of the feminine and gendered institutional language (female public health), we should speak about something beyond the biopolitical stoppages which burden the clean flow of capital. The leak here is not only waste; it doesn't just seep away. Rather, it seeps into and alters the next material it comes into contact with. The feminine aquatic is a questioning mode: I ask what is altered by my leak of artistic aspiration?

The performance attempts to think through existing conditions—general neoliberal labour practices, artistic labour, and the labour of motherhood—whilst theorising that the performance part of this artistic labour is perhaps more potent. Earlier, we linked the performance to motherhood, present-ness, survival, and care. This, perhaps, is where we can challenge forms of labour in late capitalism: opposing the need to perform one's creative subjectivity in the workplace and the de-collectivisation of those performances. This can also be seen in the contradictory instructions I give to the audience:

If you get the idea and manage to leave with me, now, that's great. But I will never push you to perform. This is the way to restore that self-reliance and self-confidence which are the basis of personal responsibility and performance success.

This part of the script coerces the audience out of their seats towards the exit and down the stairs. 'Performance' is used in the double sense, referring both to that which is occurring in the present moment (itself) and also to the general condition of successfully performing oneself within neoliberal capitalism. This instruction is performed in a tone of kindness and understanding. These words, used by the 1980s

Conservative government to conjure an optic of the individual who succeeds independently of the state, are re-contextualised against the first sentences which are taken from advice on toilet training a child. The audience is concurrently framed as child and self-reliant autonomous individual. The jarring nature of these two concepts alongside the self-referential process of the performance artwork highlight contradictions between collectivity, artistic subjectivity, and care.

The labour relations in progress are made visible through a performed care relation towards the audience, a gesture towards an intimacy or a collectivity which is not quite there, but just out of grasp. Then the 'performance' within artistic labour—as a part restoration and potential confrontation of the collective encounter—can circumvent the co-optation and the exploitation of emotional affects by re-performing a need to perform. *Aquatic Needs* both reveals a poverty of collectivity and points to an ideal scenario of collective care.

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## **Unpaid and Low-paid Labour on the Fringe: a look at Orange Skies Theatre**

By Laura Kressly

Orange Skies Theatre had been devising their newest show, *Wild Onion*, for over a year. They had applied for a grant from the Arts Council England that would fund the artists' wages and other production costs, but wouldn't know until much closer to the show's opening at Brighton Fringe 2020 if their application was successful. In the mean time, all of the creatives involved had to assume they were working for free.

This is common in small-scale British theatre despite campaigns by Equity—the British trade union representing performers and creatives—to end the practice, alongside pushing for fringe venues to pay their teams at least minimum wage. These unpaid and low-paid shows—which fill festival programmes and fringe theatre stages in London and around the country—are often made by young and/or emerging artists with little or no professional experience. These artists may have recently completed their training, or are currently students, or are looking to make theatre before or in lieu of formal training. They may just want to make work and break up the drudgery of day jobs outside of the arts, or other reasons entirely for working for little or no money. Regardless of their reasons, having little professional experience in a field that is shockingly under-funded means less experienced artists aren't likely to receive funding from one of the few pots of money that theatre artists can apply for. Even if they do, the amounts needed to fully pay production staff anything close to a fair wage as well to cover a show's other production costs are rarely covered by this money alone. Crowdfunding and self-funding are all common ways of covering production costs, although these methods rarely stretch to cover sufficient wages.

As such, people who work on these unpaid or low-paid productions must have other sources of income. While some people may subsist on personal or familial wealth, it is probable that the majority

of people working in unpaid or low-paid theatre do so whilst working in paying jobs and/or have the support of student loans to pay rent and bills. Given the dire conditions of late-stage capitalism and London's high living costs, what are the personal and professional implications of working for free or low pay? How do people balance multiple jobs, mental health, family, and friends?

I was due to visit Orange Skies in the capacity of an embedded critic during their late-March and early-April rehearsals. By observing their rehearsal process and meeting the artists involved in this devised production, I had intended to explore the unpaid and low-paid labour that is too often needed to create small-scale theatre productions in the UK. But due to COVID-19, I was unable to physically visit the rehearsal space and get to know the artists face-to-face. Fortunately, the company sent me some video footage of past rehearsal and development sessions so I could get a feel for their work, and I had several conversations with the cast and creative team by email<sup>1</sup>.

Orange Skies' Artistic director Daisy Minto explains they have crowdfunded previous productions at Camden Fringe and Edinburgh Fringe Festival, but the company is still not able to provide a fair fee for everyone's labour. Of course, she believes that all artists should be fairly paid for their work, but systemic issues of inequality, poor funding, and high costs that come with self-producing small-scale work override the best of intentions. As I emailed back and forth with Minto, she joked about the evenings she spends doing production work—like chatting with someone about rehearsal schedules—as being invisible, unpaid labour. It's work that isn't directly seen on stage, but necessary for the show's production process. She cannot do it during her day job, so has to do it outside of this time. This means her evenings, which would otherwise be spent with her family, at the theatre, socialising, or recuperating from a full day at work are instead devoted to carrying out the unpaid labour of running a small theatre company.

Whilst of course there is at least some degree of financial and

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<sup>1</sup> The company members were given the option to be interviewed and did so knowing their answers may be used in the published piece.

social privilege that enables new artists to work for low or no pay, a delicate balancing act between fully paid work or full-time studies and unpaid and low paid work is necessary for most theatre-makers. In the case of the *Wild Onion* cast, they have been devising and rehearsing the show for months, but only on Saturday afternoons in order to work around those with full-time jobs and degree courses. Whether they are in the workforce or studying, the five company members I spoke to all have to do a lot of work just to manage their time let alone the actual balancing act of work, education and caring commitments.

As well as working full-time in the arts as a freelance producer and director to pay rent and bills, Minto lives cheaply so she can feed money into the company. However, this amount of work takes its toll on her mental health, physical health, and social life; though her passion is evident, she never seems to stop working. It's not just turning up to rehearsals—she coordinates the production timescale, facilitates the devising process in the rehearsal room, and ensures the budget is as low as possible by seeking in-kind donations. She has to put this planning and production time in outside of normal work and rehearsal hours, so she's at risk of burning out from never being able to switch off.

The company's producer Sam Hughes, who works full-time as a building manager, also discusses the risk of burn out. However, he then talks about the urge artists have to create even though he believes that working for free devalues the artist's work. This drive is also evident in the outpouring of digital content during the present lockdown—from simple monologues delivered straight-to-camera, to experimenting with technology's potential—that is often done without pay, either for the purpose of fulfilling the need to create and/or to elicit financial support for venues, companies, charities, and so forth.

But what's at stake for artists willing to work for little or no money? Apart from the burnout—both physical and mental—that Minto and Hughes mention and the poor mental and physical health associated with precarious labour and worrying about finances, there is the risk that the time, money and work they put into the show could be lost. Orange Skies general manager Rachel Coleman is a student who

has invested some money into the company. She's done this because the work brings her joy, but despite having the cash to do so, she still has to make sacrifices. The time she donates to the company means she doesn't have any spare to use on other projects that pique her interest, because although she has a money job, it doesn't bring her the same level of happiness that she gets from making theatre.

Company member Audree Barvé is also a full-time student and admits she has so far resisted the need to associate making theatre with capital. But she's nearly at the end of her course and recognises that the stakes will be much higher when she isn't in a position to rely on student loans to pay her rent and bills. Gabriel Harris is another company member in a similar situation; he is a student whose student loan and part-time work as a drag artist serve as his income so he can use unpaid work as a learning experience. He hasn't yet decided to impose limits on how much unpaid theatre work he takes on because he wants to use the time he has now to widely network before he graduates. However, Harris still speaks of money worries and the impact on his mental health. With less time available to take on paying work, he is still at risk of financial insecurity.

The Orange Skies team all talk about time pressures and financial concerns, issues which aren't generally brought up in polite company in the UK. Yet, these issues, and their impact on artists' health, are no doubt widespread amongst theatre-makers who just want to make work they believe in and advance their careers. Wider conversations on these topics have only recently become more visible on social media, but there's a big step—probably a series of big steps—between acknowledging the problems are there and actively overhauling systems of labour. The theatre industry needs to ensure creatives are paid fairly and their health doesn't suffer for the sake of furthering their careers.



## **‘Work, work, work...’ Limits and Potentials of Dramaturgical Labour in Municipal Theatres**

By Antonia Tretter

‘But what do you actually *do* as a dramaturge?’ Working as a dramaturge in municipal theatres in Germany is an often questioned and ambivalent practice. As our labour oscillates between institutional security and artistic freedom, dramaturges frequently notice a contrast between intellectual creative work and administrative or managerial duties (see van Kerkhoven). We navigate within strict hierarchical structures while we simultaneously work on social critique in various productions (see Schmidt). According to Peter M. Boenisch, the professional dramaturge is often associated with the term of the ‘*Funktionär*’ (Boenisch 202). This ‘functionary’ operates within the institution’s ‘hegemonic order’, pursuing official targets that sometimes restrict artistic visions. For dramaturges *in praxis*, the negotiation of our ambiguous roles within the institution—being ‘enmeshed’ in a ‘process of legitimization, validation and control’ (van Imschoot 57)—is a crucial challenge, which now receives more activist and scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I examine limits and potentials of my own visible and invisible dramaturgical labour.

A municipal theatre in Germany appears like a fortress, stable and secure. It receives public funding. It relies on fixed schedules, long-practiced rituals such as opening night parties, superstitious rules (‘Don’t whistle backstage!’), and theatre-specific idioms (‘Break-a-leg!’). From 2016-2019, I worked as a dramaturge for the Mainfranken

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2015, alternative unions have been founded to aim for a fundamental reform of the German municipal theatre system (*Art but Fair, ensemble-netzwerk*) and care for the working conditions of professional dramaturges (*dramaturgie-netzwerk*, 2019). For instance, Jan Deck and Sandra Umathum published an anthology on *Postdramaturgien*, acknowledging the new dynamics dramaturgy as a professional practice faces in German speaking theatres.

Theatre Würzburg. Located in a mid-sized city in southern Germany, it is a small four-branch house that employs a philharmonic orchestra, an opera choir, a range of soloists, as well as an acting ensemble and a dance company.<sup>2</sup> I was one of two members in the dramaturgy department; and although the department was connected to the theatre manager, it held no power within the theatre's general management structure. In this essay, I will recapture my experience working on the production *Magnolienzeit* (*Time of the Magnolias*) (2018). I will analyse how my work as the production's dramaturge involved being a researcher, a co-director, and a production manager at once. Ultimately, I argue that dramaturges need to insist on the intellectual and artistic elements of their work as their core practice in order to responsibly perform their joint-functions within the institution of the municipal theatre.

### **Project vs. Institution**

The historical origins of the municipal theatre dramaturge's professional work in Germany are persistent and hard to deny. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing developed a strict set of rules for dramaturges. He saw them as responsible for finding the most appropriate theatrical representation of a written play and for curating the season's programs of the newly established *Nationaltheater* (see Deutsch-Schreiner). This precious heritage still leaves some traces in the dramaturges' labour today (ibid.) as it is reflected in colloquial jokes about their rigour: 'What do condoms and dramaturges have in common? With them it is more secure, but without them it's more fun'. Today, the average season of a mid-sized German municipal theatre will contain a mixture of classical drama, contemporary plays, novel adaptations, and projects of devised theatre work. Although devised projects demand more flexible ways of working together on an artistic team, the hierarchical structures and fixed roles within municipal theatres make such flexibility in labour

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<sup>2</sup> According to the website, the Mainfranken Theater Würzburg welcomes around 138,000 visitors to about 420 performances a year (<https://www.mainfrankentheater.de/en/theater/>).

practices challenging. For example, as the dramaturge for Sophocles' *Antigone* I would stay rather passive and focus on being an 'outside eye' (van Imshoot 63) for the text. Whilst a research project or documentary theatre production requires a more engaged style of dramaturgical work. Therefore, I will now take a closer look at the only documentary theatre production I worked on during my time in Würzburg in order to show that although dramaturgical practices within the institution have changed, the system has not.

*Magnolienzeit* was a research project that dealt with a crucial event in the history of Würzburg: on 16 March 1945, Royal Air Force bombs destroyed almost 90% of Würzburg's old town, causing approximately 3550 casualties (Baum 2). Using means of documentary theatre, the team<sup>3</sup> investigated the local culture of remembrance. Our theatre research project analysed both the controversial political discourse of Jewish voices and stories, which had been neglected in that culture of remembrance for too long, and extreme right-winged groups who had been abusing the civil victims of Würzburg for their nationalistic propaganda. *Magnolienzeit* was staged in a site-peculiar venue<sup>4</sup>: the *Max-Stern-Keller*, an old wine cellar beyond Würzburg's old university. This space, now the cafeteria for law students, is named after a Jewish wine merchant who fled Würzburg in 1938. The final script combined historical facts, local legends, and archival material about the event, but did not re-tell a chronological chain of events.

Whilst realising *Magnolienzeit*, we often challenged institutional structures: we needed more time and space for research; we needed a production contact person; we needed specific contracts, etc. And we questioned the distribution of responsibilities: who works on what; how do we integrate our individual interests in a common endeavour?

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<sup>3</sup> The team consisted of director Tjark Bernau, stage and costume designer Karlotta Matthies, actors Bastian Beyer, Hannes Berg, Helene Blechinger, Maria Brendel, Anton Koelbl and myself as the production's dramaturge.

<sup>4</sup> Here and in the following I use the term 'site-peculiar' instead of 'site-specific', as the cellar offers some interesting points of reference to our topic, but we did not originally develop the performance because we knew about this site.

The process of co-writing the script was analogue to our approach of doing research together as a team. The director Tjark Bernau and I—sometimes joined by the actors—interviewed fifteen people. We analysed the transcripts regarding their narrative qualities, potential to be controversial or clarifying, and their specific value in transferring the ‘then’ to the ‘now’.

While directing teams in municipal theatres usually follow a structure that allot individuals on the team to specific roles—such as director, stage design, costume, historical research—we aimed for a more equitable division of tasks. Every single scenic development was discussed democratically and collaborators were encouraged to step out of their pre-set roles. For example, I became more involved in stage design than dramaturges usually are, when I discovered the wine cellar, which became our site-peculiar venue. Our aim to work collaboratively cost time and required the communicative tools to negotiate both the content of the play, as well as structural hierarchies. The ‘passive’ dramaturge I had been for nine productions before the project was suddenly required to be actively involved, while the institutional frames and limitations remained the same. For example, while I was spending 35 hours a week on archival research, interviews, and collaging the script, I was also expected—amongst other tasks—to continue PR work, hold introductory talks, prepare forthcoming productions and support the daily theatre business. At the same time our attempt to redefine working constellations lead to a more process-orientated way of sharing knowledge within the team, unlike the most common practice in German municipal theatres where directors receive sole credit for the artistic vision of a given production. In our process, the actors, who were later to embody the collected stories on stage, especially gained a more intense connection to the performance’s material due to our approach of shared responsibility. Furthermore, Tjark Bernau and I took the actors’ interest in specific stories into account in the development of the script. This gave us a greater degree of creative freedom not often employed in all processes of municipal theatre production.

Yet, this approach posed risks of artistic exploitation. As the

working conditions in municipal theatres are already marked by long hours and unpaid overtime, we were aware that asking our team members to commit additional time for tasks outside their expertise was problematic for all of us. The sociologist Lisa Basten shows that the 'self-image' of artists reveals a 'toxic' connection between self-realisation and work, leading to self-exploitation in difficult circumstances of extensive working hours and under low wages (12-13). This was a dilemma I faced during my work on *Magnolienzeit*: the moment that I left my traditional dramaturgical space within the institution to become more active and encourage actors to get more involved in the devising process, I contributed to a more collective working atmosphere, while I also, potentially, encouraged all of us to exceed the terms of our contractual obligations. In order to fulfil the institutional goal to realize a theatre research project dealing with the events of 16 March of 1945 in Würzburg, I needed to change my position and self-image as a dramaturge completely—and I did so enthusiastically.

Through our work, the team was able to see the secure *and* fragile frames within municipal theatres, such as the precarious and often out-dated working conditions. Our wish to work together differently challenged the hierarchical structures, but, ultimately, left them in place. My experience shows that the labour of a dramaturge within municipal theatres is an increasingly contradictory practice because it is both bound by and tries to flee the limits of the institution. The more a dramaturge gets involved in the actual artistic and organizational sphere of a production, the more their dialectical relationship to theatre management becomes apparent. Extraordinary working conditions are repeatedly verified as 'exceptional' and justified by the outstanding requirements a project like *Magnolienzeit* needs.

### **Research vs. Management**

The intense involvement of my dramaturge-self in that production effected my ability to balance between the need of profound research and exceptional administrative and organizational duties. I will now show briefly how *Magnolienzeit* changed my *self-* and the *outer-*conception

of dramaturgical labour within the municipal theatre. As a dramaturge, it is my job to create an awareness for the complexity of the subject we are dealing with. I addressed ethical questions about handling historical facts and testimonies and I scrutinised the politics of memorialisation at play here. Our conceptual focus lay in questions like: How do we avoid retelling what is already well-known about this historic trauma? How do we avoid re-cultivating story lines, such as presenting the people of Würzburg as ‘victims’ without acknowledging the context of the Shoa and the total war that the NS-regime initiated?

Consequently the complexity of my role as dramaturge involved my interaction with various partners and institutions. For instance, the historian Rotraud Ries, head of the *Johanna Stabl Center for Jewish Culture and History in Lower Franconia*, was one of our most important partners in developing the project. She problematizes the city’s culture of remembrance: ‘It seems to me as if the city lost its fundament in 1945 and since then has cultivated the 16th March as a new founding myth: establishing the destruction and the experience of loss as the foundation of a civic consciousness and as historical reference’ (Ries 4). While connecting with experts like her, I created a network of other perspectives outside of the established culture of remembrance. And so, as I managed these narratives, I confronted another key element of a dramaturge’s labour within a municipal theatre, which simultaneously proves its ambiguous dimension. As soon as it is considered one of the main functions of a municipal theatre to critically reflect on the specific city’s history and society, it is the dramaturge’s mission to pursue this aim. Yet the role of the institution—represented in this case by the dramaturge—holds a complicated position itself since it is funded by the municipality, which is partly responsible for the city’s former problematic culture of remembrance. Therefore, as a dramaturge, my contribution to the theatre’s outreach in the public sphere involved balancing my critical yet representative function while engaging different cooperative partners (archives, libraries, the city’s cultural council, the university, etc). Finally, the responsibility I shouldered for this project was not comparable to the dramaturgical responsibility I have in staging

a classical play. In this peculiar case, my joint function was expanded without any additional compensation. I doubled as a dramaturge and production manager without a discussion about how I was to merge these different responsibilities. Whilst I started the project as researcher, most of the time I ended up negotiating contracts for our site-peculiar venue or ensuring that we had the keys for our rehearsals on site.

Still, by leaving the 'intermediary function' (van Imshoot 61) and the position of an 'outside eye' (63) and becoming a co-writer, a co-director, and a production manager, the profession of the dramaturge gains more public visibility. I found this to be true when my name was mentioned in reviews of *Magnolienszeit*: 'it is the great merit of Bernau and Tretter to have created a multi-voiced and multi-layered performance and to have included all perspectives despite limitations of space and time' (Natter 2). In managerial regards my role increasingly resembled the '*Funktionär*' described by Boenisch, although my first aim was still to support our artistic and conceptual goals. That this comes along with immaterial *outer* merit but is not valued monetarily is the neoliberal trick often served by municipal theatres nowadays.

### **Responsibility and Visibility**

While a research project like *Magnolienszeit* requires a different amount of time, a more flexible schedule, and specific personnel resources compared to a 'regular' production, it also shows the ambiguous dimensions of dramaturgical labour in subsidised institutions. The conflation of administrative and artistic work in the figure of the dramaturge, thus, facilitates a systemic understanding of dramaturgical labour and emphasises the necessity of institutional change. Although the encompassing workflow of *Magnolienszeit* did not suit the structures and artistic practices elaborated before, it still managed to become a successful production. This occurred in part due to the willingness of the team members to invest more resources, in part by arriving at artistic compromises, and in part as we returned to more regulated work flows in the final rehearsals. Despite my heightened awareness,

I did not escape the hierarchical system of the municipal theatre. In accepting all the duties of the manager position this production needed, I gave up time and artistic resources I rather would have invested in devising or accompanying the rehearsals. While I developed more dramaturgical self-confidence, I still operated as the institutional voice of this production. I defended regulations—like the relatively few hours of rehearsal time in the production’s actual venue—that I regretted myself. And I was too reluctant to refuse the overload of duties, though I knew better.

To protect the artistic work of a dramaturge, it is crucial to limit an overload of work. If we don’t clearly state the limits of our work capacity and just keep taking on whatever duty might benefit the theatre machine, we will lose the potential of the dramaturge’s joint position as active part, representative, and critic of the production and reduce them to a stopgap function. Taking seriously the political dimensions of the labour of dramaturgy will aide in disclosing structural problems within the institution as a whole. My experience shows that the question ‘what does a dramaturge actually do?’ cannot be answered by just enumerating all tasks a dramaturge performs. In order to create more visibility of the labour of a dramaturge, we must stand up for the ‘in-between’ work concerning conceptual, textual, and discursive practices *and* acknowledge the danger of compensating for institutional failures.

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## ‘Critical Plagiarism’ as Discursive Labour: A Conversation with Leah Modigliani

By Laurel V. McLaughlin and Leah Modigliani

As an artist, professor, and critic, Leah Modigliani practices what she calls ‘critical plagiarism’. The multifaceted process queries how power, history, and aesthetics are constructed and maintained within a ‘theatre’ of discourse(s). Modigliani’s ‘critical plagiarism’ performs the discursive labour of deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of historic speeches through strategies of their own making: citing, editing, and inserting—whether clandestinely or directly—autobiographical information. Consequently, this discursive labour not only reveals its own conditions of production and circulation, but ‘produces’ a performative call to action through Modigliani’s incisive dialogue between past and present. The following conversation emerged from a studio visit in January 2019 and subsequent email exchanges concerning the speeches as artistic interventions, and particularly focuses on Modigliani’s ‘plagiarized’ speech of Canadian labour activist William A. Pritchard, ‘Spectre Of The Future Accused’, and its accompanying performative installation.



**Fig. 1:** Leah Modigliani, *Spectre of the Future Accused* (detail), Sept. 30, 2017. Humagram video projection on the site of Marshall McLuhan’s University of Toronto classroom. Photo: Yuula Benivolski.

Laurel V. McLaughlin (LVM): *In our last studio visit, you mentioned several speeches that you selected, examined, edited, 'plagiarised', and inevitably, thought alongside. Could you discuss one or two of these speeches, and outline when they've appeared in your practice? It strikes me that they act as a theatre of sorts within your larger body of work, in that the speeches bring together numerous threads from your practice.*

Leah Modigliani (LM): Over many years I have redeployed historical speeches in my creative work. I have since begun calling this practice *critical plagiarism*; which might be described as a method of selectively revising past voices for political use in the present through auto-biographically inflected *rewriting*. My interest in speeches dates back to when I created a sculptural installation titled *The Great One* (2002–05), that centered around a video reenactment of the retirement speech of hockey player Wayne Gretzky, which I performed verbatim for the camera (*The Great One*). This piece was different from my recent use of speeches, because I did not change the text, and because it only obliquely referenced politics through my choice to re-gender Gretzky as a female athlete. My more recent work is more explicitly political in content. Since then, I've creatively adapted a number of historical speeches by notable figures like Alexis de Tocqueville, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Emma Goldman, and the less well-known figure of Canadian labour organizer and socialist William A. Pritchard.

Working with these speeches combines what I enjoy doing most: researching history, critically examining how discourse mediates or reestablishes dominant power dynamics, and practicing the craft of writing. The rewriting of these speeches is the closest I come in my work to an improvisational practice. The most important aspect of adapting these speeches is choosing which historical speech I want to work with in the first place. Usually there is something in the original text that I relate to personally; something in the writer's original words that strikes me as being very contemporary and I can imagine myself as the author of these same words. I'm struck both by the continued relevance of their ideas in my own time and the evidence of changing social norms

that remain embedded in the texts. I am aware of the unconscious and implicit biases of the original writer's social position, so I try to update their texts to conform to my own personal politics while preserving the broader philosophical, moral, or theoretical ideas with which I identify. Through the labour of revising these older discourses I publicly endorse specific social values, and assert that my individual voice matters, while demonstrating my personal and professional solidarity with the ongoing collaborative struggle towards greater social justice.

*LVM: You reflect further upon critical plagiarism as artistic intervention in your essay 'Critical Plagiarism and the Politics of Creative Labour: Photographs, History, and Re-enactment', classifying it as part manifesto, part biography, part auto-biography—between art and scholarship. The construction of this intermediality actually composes part of the discursive labour, no? It acts as an acknowledgement of the precarity of dissenting speech under capitalism, and also performs an alternative positionality.*

*LM: The characteristic that all these speeches share is that they speak to the conflict between the human desire for autonomy and the varying degrees of societal structure by which we are governed and oppressed. The choice of non-conformity; that is, my choice to work in between 'forms, authorities, politics, and genres', as you said so nicely, rather than define myself in the career marketplace as one thing ('modern and contemporary art historian' or 'sculptor', etc.) is an active choice not to constrain my creative and intellectual interests and capabilities. It is also necessarily an active choice not to pursue the commercial art market, which requires a kind of simple branding or reductively imagined 'specialization' to find success. I reject the idea that one person can't be excellent at more than one thing; and, as much as possible, I want to limit my exposure to unfree social relations grounded in market dynamics. I'm attracted to speeches that overtly profess and reckon with the writer's conflict regarding their passion for an ideal that they feel is at odds with the contemporary status quo.*

itself to them. It means a risk; it means giving up small material achievements. It means going against 'public opinion' and the laws and rules of one's country. There are few people who have the daring and the courage to give up what they hug at their hearts.<sup>6</sup> They fear that their possible gain will not be the equivalent for what they give up.

As for me, I was not born and raised – I 'grew'.<sup>7</sup> I grew with life, life in all its aspects, in its heights and in its depths. The price to pay is high, of course, but unless you are willing to pay the price, unless you are willing to plunge into the very depths, you will never be able to remount to the heights of life.

Naturally, life presents itself in different forms to different ages. Between the age of eight and twelve like a lot of girls I dreamed of becoming an Angel, or a Blondie or even a Madonna.<sup>8</sup> I longed to avenge the limitations of my sex, to climb through the glass ceiling and throw the glass shards around on the way up. When I was fourteen I retreated to the studio to draw and compose romantic poetry, trying to connect to others, silently planning my escape from the conservative values of my little town.<sup>9</sup> When I was seventeen I suffered from unrequited love, and I drove around drunk on my bicycle until I broke my wrist and

4. American indebted households are carrying on average \$15,593 in credit card debt; \$153,184 in mortgage debt and \$32,511 in student loan debt as of November, 2014. See Tim Chen, 'American Household Credit Card Debt Statistics: 2014', *Nerd Wallet Finance*, November 2014, accessed online November 11, 2014 at <http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/credit-card-data/average-credit-card-debt-household/>. Chen's numbers are aggravated compiled from data provided by the 2010 US Census, the Federal Reserve's Aggregate Revolving Consumer Debt Survey and Survey of Consumer Finances (2009). Student loan debt has increased significantly over twenty years. According to data findings released by the US Department of Education in October 2013, 'In 2009, a larger percentage (31 percent) of graduates in repayment faced high monthly loan payments (greater than 12 percent of their monthly income), than their counterparts in 1994 and 2001'. Also, significantly, the average cumulative debt in constant 2009 dollars increased from \$15,000 in 1994 to \$24,700 in 2009. See Jenny H. Woo, 'Degrees of Debt: Student Borrowing and Loan Repayment of Bachelor's Degree Recipients 1 Year After Graduating', published by the National Center for Education Statistics at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014011.pdf> (accessed November 10, 2014). This issue is reaching a critical mass and is becoming a significant political issue for Democrats in the 2016 elections, with Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Hillary Clinton all prioritizing theoretical solutions to the problem of student debt in their political campaigning.

5. Emma Goldman makes a general reference here to the incompatibility of submission to God with Anarchism's core belief that man should submit to no authority other than his own autonomy. Goldman's 'bungling god' echoes the tone of Mikhail Bakunin's description of a God angered by Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden in 'God and the State': 'The good God, whose foresight, which is one of the divine faculties, should have warned him of what would happen, flew into a terrible and ridiculous rage; he cursed Satan, man, and the world created by himself, striking himself so to speak in his own creation, as children do when they get angry; and, not content with smiting our ancestors themselves, he cursed them in all the generations to come, innocent of the crime committed by their forefathers'. Rather than all-knowing, God is imagined as an immature child not yet in control of his own emotions

Fig. 2: The text set in Helvetica font is Goldman's original text and the text set in Times font is Modigliani's.

Leah Modigliani, 'The Snake and the Falcon', *Anarchist Studies* 23.2 (2015): 89–97.

Leah Modigliani

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suffered the embarrassment of having to explain it. At eighteen I went to Cairo and dared to walk alone through the City of the Dead, until a young man chased me out, screaming apologies for thinking he could grab me and kiss me. I too wanted to scream all the time, but to do so while dancing.<sup>10</sup>

Then came America, America with its promises of freedom, opportunity and meritocracy. So, like many before me, I went to be educated in and by San Francisco, the home and heart of the Left.<sup>11</sup> Living that life however now cost a pretty penny, so I subsidised my creative pursuits with student loan debt and waitressing work, serving cheap drinks to drunk cable-car drivers until the manager hit another waitress and I quit.<sup>12</sup> My youth was filled with the images and sounds of a changing world, and they leaked into my soul without me realizing it, so that tears occasionally rose out of me at unexpected moments.

I quietly minded this empathy, not knowing what to do with it. And together we marched for the students in Tiananmen square, and together we watched the Berlin Wall come down without yet knowing what that meant, and together we marched for the fourteen young women murdered in Montreal.<sup>13</sup> Through it all, we asked 'What does it mean

and not yet able to accept the consequences of his actions. Michael Bakunin, *God and the State* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1970), p10.

6. Edward Snowden is a notable contemporary exception.

7. The original lines by Goldman reads 'As for myself, I can say that I was like Topsy. I was not born and raised – I "grewed"'. Goldman is likely referencing the character of Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When asked by Miss Ophelia whether she knows that God made her, the slave girl answers 'I spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody never made me'. See: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: J. Cassell, 1852), p207. To 'grow like Topsy' became a common way of expressing how one might have developed without a particular plan in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. As a relatively privileged white middle-class woman living into the twenty-first century, however, I am uncomfortable with appropriating Goldman's reference to the black character of Topsy and so I have eliminated it.

8. I am referring to three things: the popular television program *Charlie's Angels*, which was broadcast on ABC from 1976-1981, and featured three female detectives originally played by actors Kate Jackson, Farah Fawcett-Majors and Jaclyn Smith; the proto-punk band Blondie (formed in 1974) fronted by charismatic singer Debby Harry that enjoyed widespread success with the release of their album *Parallel Lines* in 1978; and of course the Material Girl herself, American singer-songwriter Madonna Louise Ciccone who became a star with the international release and success of her first album titled *Madonna* in 1985. These women, for different reasons would inspire the imaginations of young ambitious female teenagers like myself born in the late 1960s to early 1970s.

9. Between the ages of nine and seventeen I lived in Victoria, British Columbia, a place then and still marketed to tourists as 'a piece of Olde England'.

10. The original line, 'but at sixteen I decided on a more exalted death. I wanted to dance myself to death' is one of the most quoted excerpts from Goldman's speech. I edited it to be more in keeping with my own psychology and biography.

11. I moved to San Francisco from Victoria in 1995 to attend the Masters of Fine Arts programme in sculpture at the San Francisco Art Institute. I chose to go there without first

Anarchist Studies 23.2

**Fig. 2:** The text set in Helvetica font is Goldman's original text and the text set in Times font is Modigliani's.

Leah Modigliani, 'The Snake and the Falcon', *Anarchist Studies* 23.2 (2015): 89–97.

*LVM: In the same essay, you begin to outline the collaborative aspect of this discursive labour: 'They [the speeches] nonetheless exist as labour in the present and beg for continuity with such labours of the past' ('Critical Plagerism'). So, how do you view your own labour—or authorship—alongside those of the original authors such as Emma Goldman? I'm referring to the section above where you insert your experience directly within hers beginning with, 'As for me [...] on pg. 91. Are you collaborators, cross-temporal interlocutors? And then why do you insert the autobiographical, as seen in this excerpt?'*

LM: I understand these utterances as a kind of time travel—your description of a 'cross-temporal interlocutor'. As public texts of some renown (these texts were historically preserved while presumably many others were not), the original speaker self-consciously addressed future readers, and established themselves as what Foucault has called a discourse initiator. A discourse is a collaborative form of labour that is acted upon over time. In my work, I am consciously placing myself in conversation with a number of historical figures who established a discourse that continues to speak to my contemporary condition long after they are gone. My critical plagiarism is essentially a way of making visible the work that goes into critically contributing to the discourse in the present. In my view, revealing the nature of invisible labour is crucial to recognizing the complexity of people's lives today, and the inequities of our current social system. Popular activism today includes fighting for recognition of deeply embedded structural racism(s) and economic compensation for it, fighting for higher wages and increased expenditure on social safety nets, and more open discussion about what people are paid for what kind of work. All of this activism has emerged through visibility of issues. Visibility is thus key to social reform. Like others, I am reckoning with the differences between the work I do as a scholar and artist, and the work that has been and continues to be invested in various forms of socio-political activism. What 'work' does art do? In my case, the dialogues with historical figures in the past that I enact through critical plagiarism strengthen my solidarity with progressive ideas that I want to preserve or highlight in the present.

In such a spirit on my part and on yours we face our common difficulties. They concern, thank God, only material things. The value of working Americans' labor has precipitously decreased in recent decades; taxes on the wealthiest Americans have declined; government of all kinds is faced by serious curtailment of income and States ability to fund integral social programs like public education has weakened<sup>3</sup> even as corporate lobbyists fund the methods of government in greater sums than ever before; the withered leaves of manufacturing lie on every side<sup>4</sup>; families have no savings and are increasingly carrying too much personal debt.<sup>5</sup>

More important, despite their possession of material goods bought at prices cheaper than ever before, many of our under employed citizens face the grim problem of an existence that cannot sustain them, toiling with little return.<sup>6</sup> Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment.

<sup>3</sup> According to a Dec. 2014 report by the United States Government Accountability Office, commissioned by the US Senate's Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, state funding for public colleges decreased 12% overall, and 24% per student, between 2003-2012, while tuition in public colleges increased 55% over the same time period. Student enrollment at these same colleges in the same years increased by 20%, making the deficit of funding that much worse. See: Melissa Emrey-Arras, GAO-15-151 (Dec. 2014): 7; accessed online Jan 15, 2015: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/667557.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Between 1970 and 2000 the amount of manufacturing jobs was relatively stable in the United States, between 17-18 million. 5 million manufacturing jobs have, however been lost since 2000 due to the effects of ongoing trade deficits much higher than in earlier decades. See: Robert E. Scott, "Manufacturing Job Loss: Trade, not Productivity, is the Culprit," Economic Policy Institute, August 11, 2015. Accessed online on Jan. 11, 2015: <http://www.epi.org/publication/manufacturing-job-loss-trade-not-productivity-is-the-culprit/>

<sup>5</sup> Working Americans lives have become more precarious in recent decades. They are working longer hours per week, have accumulated more personal debt, are suffering the unsustainable rising costs of college education, and the value of their labor generally pays for less than it did even three decades ago. The necessity for two working adults to pay for the costs of one family's expenses (historically understood by economists as a family of two adults and two children) in conjunction with little to no savings means that there is little buffer in place to ward off economic collapse if one adult loses their job, or if the family is surprised by a large unexpected expense. Middle income families (53% of the US households in 2008 earned between \$34,000 and \$110,000 annually) are working eleven more hours a week than they did in 1979, according to a 2010 report on work family conflict released jointly by The Center for American Progress Organization and University of California's Center for Work-Life Law: Heather Boushey and Joan C. Williams, "The Three Faces of Work Family Conflict," <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2010/01/pdf/threefaces.pdf> (accessed Jan. 17, 2015). American indebted households are carrying on average \$15,355 in credit card debt; \$165,892 in mortgage debt and \$47,172 in student loan debt in 2015 (student loan debt was an average of \$32,511 in 2014). See Erin el Issa, "American Credit Card Debt Study 2015," *Nerd Wallet Finance*, accessed online Jan. 17, 2015 at <http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/credit-card-data/average-credit-card-debt-household/>. El Issa's numbers are aggravates compiled from data provided by a poll they conducted amongst 2,017 adults on Nov. 2-4, 2015, and data acquired from the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Census Bureau, and US Department of Agriculture. Student loan debt has increased significantly over twenty years. According to data findings released by the US Department of Education in October 2013, "In 2009, a larger percentage (31 percent) of graduates in repayment faced high monthly loan payments (greater than 12 percent of their monthly income), than their counterparts in 1994 and 2001." Also, significantly, the average cumulative debt in constant 2009 dollars increased from \$15,000 in 1994 to \$24,700 in 2009. See Jenny H. Woo, "Degrees of Debt: Student Borrowing and Loan Repayment of Bachelor's Degree Recipients 1 Year After Graduating," published by the National Center for Education Statistics at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014011.pdf> (accessed Nov 10, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> There is a popular misconception that lower and middle income earners have less disposable income than in the 1970s because they buy too many commodities they don't really need. Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi call this "The Over Consumption Myth." In actual fact, after tracking American's spending on specific products they conclude that Americans are now spending 21% less on clothing, 22% less on food (groceries and eating out combined), and 44% less on major appliances since the early 1970s. See: Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi, *The Two Income Trap, Why Middle Class Parents Are Going Broke* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) 15-17.

Fig. 4: Leah Modigliani, *Only a Foolish Opportunist Can Deny the Dark Realities of the Moment A Presidential Address*, unpublished script, 2016.

Roosevelt's words are presented as blue Times font, and Modigliani words are set in red text.



*LVM: This process of reckoning that you mentioned becomes visible in the aesthetics of your critical plagiarism. For instance, in your adaptations of the Goldman speech, you use footnotes and the double column to denote temporal distance and continuity. In your ‘plagiarizing’ of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s ‘The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself’, from 1933, seen above, you make use of footnotes, various colors, and fonts to distinguish voice and edits. In ‘Spectre of the Future Accused’, 2017 seen below, however, your edits are seemingly inconspicuous, until they are uttered (through emotive directives). Could you discuss the ways that you’re making your discursive labour both visible and invisible here?*

LM: In all of this work I am trying out different tactics for making visible the changes from the original. That impulse for revision comes from the history of feminist deconstruction, which allows for new meanings to be derived from the inconsistencies, exclusions, or implicit biases of older texts. It seems to be a deeply embedded part of my character to be skeptical of all inherited hierarchies and perceived truths. Because of this, I want to announce my own position as someone working on the discourse as it evolves. I want the reader to be made aware of the multiplicity of voices contributing to the idea. In the FDR and Goldman speeches, I felt it was productive to signal how I interpret the concepts of ‘socialism’, ‘anarchism’, etcetera, from my position as an educated ‘middle-class’ white North American woman in the 21st century. Although it was also based on a courtroom speech, the text I wrote for ‘Spectre of the Future Accused’ was a script that would be performed by an actor in a ‘holographic’ video projection outdoors in a public art festival. As such, there would be viewers, but not readers, so I needed to visually signal the changes I made to the text through the image of the character (the male protagonist was purposefully re-sexed as female and performed by a female actor) and through her references. Her speech is an

artful combination of early 20<sup>th</sup> century references and cadences (taken from Pritchard's life as expressed in his original speech), mixed with obvious 21<sup>st</sup> century references and cadences (inspired auto-biographically by my own experiences). I also gave the actor direction about how and when to emote certain lines, which are based on my own lived experience. In 'Spectre', my critical plagiarism was performed quite literally.

And yet, for the first time in the history of the Labor Movement *The Communist Manifesto* has been plucked from a citizen's home library and dragged in as evidence of a seditious conspiracy to destabilize the democratically elected government. The State is arrogant and powerful enough to claim "this is poison," "this is seditious" merely because they want to. It's like saying there a million people standing here in front of this Courthouse, when in fact you and I can look around and see that only a few dozen are standing there. Just because you say it is true, doesn't mean it is true.

*[taking tone of teacher again]* Remember how Galileo, when he heard about the telescope that the Dutchman Lippershey had invented, immediately figured out how to make one himself, and looking through it at the sky he saw things the naked eye could not. At the time thousands of people went around saying "I can only believe my own eyes," and so denied the existence of Jupiter's four moons that Galileo had seen. And the lawyers of that day came around and said "If Jupiter has four moons Galileo must have made them himself and stuck them into his telescope."

So, here I am today, centuries later, utilizing fact-based economic research to tell you that Capitalism has become so intense; has become so complex; and grown to such a degree that it can no longer guarantee a living wage to all its workers even as their productivity has increased and investors' profits rise. When I tell you that "Workers' net productivity has increased more than 70 percent in the last fifty years but inflation-adjusted salaries have only increased 8 percent;" [2] what do I mean?

**Fig. 5:** Leah Modigliani, 'Spectre of the Future Accused', 2017.

LVM: *As you just said, while all of your speeches are text-based, 'Spectre of the Future Accused' (2017) critically plagiarizes Canadian labour organizer William A. Pritchard's Address to the Jury concerning his involvement in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, which is then performed by actor Lexie Braverman. Playing Pritchard, Braverman defends herself against federal charges of Seditious Conspiracy and Common Nuisance for conspiring to organize a strike. Could you say more about this work in relation to its site and history of labour activism?*

LM: 'Spectre of the Future Accused' was commissioned by curator Barbara Fischer and the City of Toronto for the all-night Nuit Blanche festival in 2017. Nuit Blanche has a large public audience of about a million people who attend the annual all-night event at the end of September each year. I wanted to acknowledge three key aspects of the show: Fischer's curatorial theme of 'Taking to the Street', that 2017 was the centenary of the October Revolution in Russia, and I felt my work should relate to the outdoor site of its display in Toronto.

I created a ghostly figure who hovers above the old University

of Toronto classroom where media scholar Marshall McLuhan once lectured. A jury box and gallery benches were placed on the ground in front of the levitating figure for audience seating. The spectral figure defends her socialist beliefs to the public jury who, having sat in the provided seating, are implicitly tasked with adjudicating her fate. The script is adapted from the 1920 courtroom speech of William A. Pritchard, who defended himself against the Canadian government's charges of seditious conspiracy for allegedly helping to organise the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. The latter was the biggest organized labour strike in Canadian history (30,000 people walked off their jobs). It was deemed very threatening to the federal government who feared the strikes would spread across the country, and so sided with employers. The federal government arrested many organizers, including Pritchard.

His original courtroom defense summary lasted 24 hours, and when published was 219 pages long. As in the other speeches I've adapted, I changed the script to correspond to my own voice, edited it down to 77 minutes spoken, and then hired a female actor (Lexie Braverman) to convincingly portray a contemporary social activist. Originally I wanted to create a hologram, but a true hologram is technically impossible at human scale. Instead, we hired a company to project her as a 'humagram', a high-tech video projection used in advertising campaigns and dead celebrity performances that can look very three-dimensional. In popular culture, holograms always appear visually dated (like R2-D2's projection of Princess Leia in *Star Wars*), or else they represent something futuristic, since in reality this technology is always just out of our reach. So, the hologram is never 100% in our own time. I thought this choice of medium complemented Marshall McLuhan's writings about the temporal nature of media.

Pritchard's original speech to his jury shows the pedagogical imperative prevalent in the work of labour organizers like himself in the early twentieth-century. Socialist newspapers like the *Western Clarion* (of which Pritchard was the editor) were written to and for the working classes, and are by today's standards quite intellectual. Articles were written with the purpose of educating workers to the structure

of local and federal politics, their legal rights, and the moral basis of their struggle for personal and financial gains. When Pritchard took the stand to essentially defend his life's work, he used his courtroom time as a public platform for educating the jury and the public about the history of socialism, why workers should fight for their rights, and why his political beliefs were for him simply common sense. I was attracted to his speech because I found his ideas to have renewed currency and relevancy today.

In adapting Pritchard's speech, I wanted to call attention to the resurgence of interest in socialism by a younger generation whose future life prospects under the current neoliberal world order are diminished. I also wanted to amplify the commitment to teaching as a critical form of activism. My interest in Pritchard is linked to my observation that we are witnessing increasingly virulent forms of protest by disenfranchised, poor, and unemployed or underemployed youth around the world. These protests will likely continue, and will be met by increasingly entrenched and weaponised state apparatuses. In my view, the reasons for this are not significantly different from one-hundred years ago: anger and fear over deeply embedded legal and economic colonial racism; gross income inequality; weakened or non-existent social welfare systems (which are increasingly obvious under COVID-19), and fears of immigration. These have been attenuated and complicated by the speed of information and the climate emergency. In this context, it seems important that art can draw out the historic parallels of labour organization and political revolution. It's a productive form of solidarity, this conversation with the past.

*LVM: Labour organization and the necessity of revolution have perhaps never felt more urgent than presently as global ways of living and economies buckle under the effects of COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>, and revelations of systemic*

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<sup>1</sup> The World Health Organization's timeline of COVID-19 outlines the virus's emergence in December 2019 and global spread through the publication of this interview. Countries across the globe ordered lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, business shut downs, pandemic health care procedures, and social-

*racial injustices continue to come to light. In this surreal contemporary moment, where rhetoric—specifically misinformation—garners the power to spread ill-will and illness alike, how might ‘critical plagiarism’ be mobilized as performative practice?*

LM: This is an important question. In April, before the current protests against racial injustice after George Floyd’s murder exploded, I was mulling over performative strategies of re-enactment with my graduate students in photography. We were reading Rebecca Schneider’s important book *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011). One of Schneider’s central premises is that time need not be a fixed moment, that indeed time(s) may recur and may be revisited, and that all times involve intra-temporal negotiations. What is at stake in such returns is the promise of the future and our ability to intervene in the past. This is what critical plagiarism offers: the appropriation of progressive labour done by texts and images in the past for their selective *re-vision* and *re-use* in the present for the future. In regards to our truly unprecedented current situation, we may find our way forward by revisiting writing and reporting on related historical incidents; finding lost or forgotten documents about the management of the Spanish Flu, critiques of white supremacy, advocating for minimum living wages; arguments for socialism, and general critiques of capitalism, amongst other useful topics worthy of *re-visiting* and *re-versioning*. An everyday practice of critical plagiarism can prefigure what will come by assessing what we already know to be true and boldly asserting it.

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distancing, drastically changing the social, political, and economic landscape of 2020. Concurrently, protests in the United States concerning police brutality erupted 25 May 2020 and continue to the date of this publication, calling for the defunding and divestment of policing and systemic addresses and future actions against racism.

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## Performance Responses

### Do you know a love song...? Action Hero's *Oh Europa*

Created by Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse of Action Hero. Nyon, Switzerland. 21 August 2020.

By Olivia Lamont Bishop



**Fig. 1:** Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse of Action Hero with their caravan. Photo by Paul Blakemore.

I sit in my living room, surrounded by the objects that form the composite pieces of my life. Settling onto the sofa with my well-worn headphones, I type in the URL for a Swiss radio station—an activity that has begun to feel increasingly familiar over the last few months of 2020. My environment, cluttered with personal artefacts, has formed the backdrop to numerous performances, artworks, and talks which I have made pains to continue to engage with. Thanks to this ‘new normal’, I am starting to become very much used to my home being inhabited by these works.

What I hear when the 30-minute programme starts enhances this feeling of familiarity. The show begins with two voices singing to me, reminiscent of friends that have recorded and sent me audio messages; their delivery shaky but full of life. Their names are Olivier and Martine, and the song they have chosen to sing together—the song that represents their love story—is *Salut les Amoureux* by Joe Dassin.

Recorded a few days before this radio broadcast in Nyon, Switzerland, Olivier and Martine took part in Action Hero's *Oh Europa*. I learn that Olivier and Martine have been together for one year but are rekindling a relationship they began as teenagers. They hope to get married soon. As I listen, my ears lead my eyes to draw a picture of them and I imagine them sitting in Action Hero's touring van across from the performance makers Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse (see Figure 1); maybe they are nervously embracing the moment to share a personal interpretation of the soundtrack that has accompanied their love story.

Olivier and Martine's song is featured in day four of *Oh Europa*, which took place as part of Far Festival in Nyon during late August 2020. Action Hero's journey of 42,800km (at least until the date of broadcast), has collected 940 recordings of love songs spanning the continent of Europe. They are seeking to find a shared space through the medium of music and a unified understanding with the sounds of love songs. These songs might be recorded by anyone the duo encounters on their journey. The featured singers in the show I listened to were full of contrasts, such as confident Matty in Finland and shy Samir in Lille (who returned several times before finding the courage to perform).

This is a truly pan-European project and I encounter this span of place and experience during the short, 30-minute broadcast in my living room. The voices in this particular show—drawn from those collected by Paintin and Stenhouse since 2018—include other singers from London, Leeds and the Netherlands alongside Olivier, Martine, Samir and Matty. *Oh Europa's* conception and early life aligned with the fracturing relationship between the UK and Europe and with national and European identities appearing to splinter. Action Hero's intention became to investigate how it was possible for people to connect in a way divergent to discussing national politics and cultural identities.

It is also possible to tune into the project via one of the 41 'beacons' that have been rooted across Europe, all accessible through *Oh Europa's* app. As I look on the app, I see there is a 'beacon' about 15 minutes away from me in Bristol, and it strikes me that there are numerous formats and environments that afford me the chance to



experience this work. At a time when Brexit seems to have lost its primacy in our thoughts and become just one of many challenges that face us in 2020, *Oh Europa* affords us a rare opportunity to capitalise on the solitude and introspectiveness of the last few months and to explore this inherently connected work by listening to something as simple as a love song. This gives a chance to privilege the auditory as the primary tool for perception. Perhaps it is in the opportunity to experience this work in my own living room that the greatest shift of personal changes of perspective has occurred.

It is also in fragility and gentle human error that this performance builds a connection of humanity across borders. Listening to Olivier and Martine's version of *Salut les Amoureux*, I witness the moments of imperfection in a meaningful performance between the two lovers. I glimpse into the idiosyncrasies of a relationship to which I am made privy through this performance; I see the secret moments that resonate with my own relationships. Olivier talks as they sing, tenderly cajoling Martine about forgetting the lyrics. Their audible breathing punctuates the singing; these breaths taken out of time engenders a sense of authenticity. The pauses are filled with a giggle or a clearing of the throat; though made public, these moments make the listening experience feel intimate.

The last singer on the show is Chloe, who performs a warm and passionate version of Adele's *Make You Feel My Love*. This momentarily feels transporative, as I remember this sung at my sister's wedding some ten years ago. I am taken aback at how the sound resonates through my ears and into the space around me, interpenetrating through space and time into memories and shared experience. Paintin and Stenhouse state in a review that contemporary viewpoints on Europe are flooded with opinion, and that through *Oh Europa* they wanted to garner less opinion, and more feeling (Simpson). In Chloe's song, I reminiscence on a time of togetherness, a stream of personal and collective consciousness tuning into focus instead of the stream of news usually feeding through my radio, even if just for half an hour.

These polyphonic micro-biographies of relationships cross

boundaries and borders and pin new coordinates of personal experiences on maps through these ‘beacons’. *Oh Europa* sees the artistic work of Paintin and Stenhouse become a roving cartographic practice, offering new possibilities for roaming creations and reception in the comfort of one’s own living room. This therefore traces Europe on a dual corporeal and intangible stage: a ‘really existing’ Europe and a shared cultural imagining. As I listen, I reflect that I am experiencing the labour of forging connections through an archive of personal networks that mirrors the global as well as experiencing the chance to connect with people locally in their own homes. Perhaps an unplanned silver lining of the crippling issues faced by the theatre sector with audiences unable or struggling to visit public spaces is that—hopefully—such inventive new works can thrive.

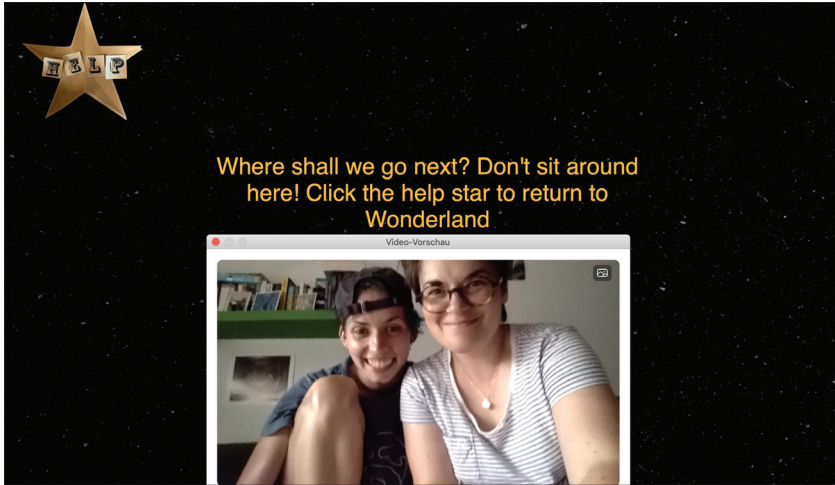
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## *Alice – A Virtual Theme Park*

Directed by Zoë Seaton. Creation Theatre and Big Telly Theatre, via Zoom. 1-30 August 2020. Watched on 12 August 2020.

By Heidi Łucja Liedke



**Fig. 1:** Screen shot taken during the show of author and her partner.  
Photo: by the author.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both forced and inspired theatre companies around the world to leave their traditional theatrical sites and bring their shows into audiences' living rooms: this is not the time to 'play it safe'. The resulting collaborations between the Oxford-based company Creation Theatre and Belfast's Big Telly Theatre have resulted in pioneering work in this regard, with their *The Tempest* being one of the first shows to be performed via Zoom in April and May 2020. For their summer production (or rather, summer adventure) they teamed up with Charisma.ai, a company that specializes in turning graphic novels into interactive experiences and creating interactive drama through virtual reality technologies. In *Alice – A Virtual Theme Park*—a Covidian Zoom adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865)—audiences were catapulted from their living room sofas out of lockdown and into a tea party with the Mad Hatter and the Dormouse. As is

typical for Creation Theatre's productions, spectators were encouraged (but in no way obliged) to leave their web cameras on so that they were visible to other ticket holders in the 'gallery view'. 30 minutes before the show we were emailed 'A Guide to Wonderland', which included practical information and the encouragement to: '[e]njoy your journey and mind your head!'

The immersive nature of the event quickly made Alice's adventures our adventures. After following Alice (Leda Douglas) down the rabbit hole, the performance became a game rather than a play. Every few minutes a symbol on the screen was available to click (see Figure 1), which would lead to one of several different Zoom rooms in which the Mad Hatter (Dharmesh Patel), Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Tom Richardson played both of them with the help of a mirror and an iPhone), the Queen of Hearts (Vera Chok), or the Queen's Italian Cook (Annabelle Terry) were waiting. The Queen of Hearts in particular displayed a sadistic enjoyment of a kind of—fortunately not lethal—pop version of Russian roulette. Different pop songs were played to which both she and the spectators were supposed to show their best dance moves. Every time the music stopped, an audience member was selected at random and shouted at (if she could have, she would have certainly pushed the selected person to the wall) to tell her why she was the best, the most beautiful, or another such narcissistic question. If one failed to provide a satisfactory answer (which, in fact, was the case for everybody except one extravagantly dressed and well-prepared audience member), the Queen replied curtly with a shrill '[o]ff with your head!!!' Clearly inspired by her malignance, the Queen's Italian Cook stirred an especially disgusting mixture in a big pot trying to convince the audience that it was indeed her who made the best jam tarts.

I had earlier read a tweet about the show where a participant described playing croquet with hedgehogs; though bizarre, this indeed turned out to be true as spectators were prompted to take out their smartphones and go to the website 'hedgehog.land' (possibly an allusion to the musical version of *Alice* by Damon Albarn, Moira Buffini, and Rufus Norris that was staged at the National Theatre in

2016 and called 'wonder.land'). Here, they could create an avatar in the shape of a hedgehog with which they could take part in a croquet match (accompanied by the screams of the Queen of Hearts). Despite the childish curiosity that this brought about, I felt a certain reluctance creeping up: had I wanted to play a pixelated multi-player game on my smartphone, I would have done just that and not bought a £20 ticket for a theatre play. But this was the only bump in an otherwise positively chaotic and unruly 80 minute-long virtual adventure.

While the show was a VR performance, it never felt overwhelmed by technology. Even more than with *The Tempest* there was an impression that audience members had 'shown up' (or, one must say, popped up on the screen) for their own sake. More precisely: the show was characterized by an awareness that the most important person in the room—in people's own rooms, but also in the virtual room created by the theatre company—was the spectator. As director Zoë Seaton told me in a personal interview on 17 August 2020, this has been her approach to making theatre for the past three decades: creating theatre for audiences, devising shows that leave room for the unexpected, and shifting focus to the group that is traditionally 'merely' watching. Of course, with Zoom theatre, one cannot make things or people crash through ceilings or hide notes under people's chairs, but the dizzying array of choices that *Alice* offered gave spectators a considerable amount of agency: it made them somehow responsible, not for the outcome of the show, but for their own enjoyment. Were you willing to give everything you had during the dance-off with the Queen of Hearts? Were you quick enough to hand the cook a handkerchief? On the latter, I wasn't, and my 'smelly old rug' was belittled accordingly.

At the end of the show, the exhaustion one felt as an audience member was, on the one hand, a confused one: what had just happened? Why had one of the butterflies appearing on the screen during the tea party been called Brexitfly? On the other hand, this was the exhaustion of theatrical labour: we had been in a relay race down and back up again a rabbit hole and we gladly took up the baton that had been passed to us. The notions of space—the private and the public—and the potential

of actors' and spectators' agencies had been suspended and shifted temporarily. In the same way that the Mad Hatter—taking out different cardboard sets in his paper maché hat depicting a stage—mumbled '[o]ps, took out the wrong one... The magic of live theatre!', this switching between Zoom rooms, hedgehog races, and strangers' faces was both dizzying and magical: a theatrical somersault and virtual spin on a 155 year-old labyrinth of a story.

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## Book Reviews

### ***Cultural Labour: Conceptualising the Folk Performance in India* by Brahma Prakash**

London: Oxford University Press, 2019, 333 pp. (hardcopy)

By Satkirti Sinha

In this investigation of the criticism and creativeness of folk culture, Brahma Prakash explores a broad conception of folk styles informed by a history of ‘caste and gender oppression in India’ (2019: 8). As per the Hindu law book *Manusmriti*, the Brahmins are considered to be the ‘purest’ of the four castes and in the caste hierarchy have been traditionally assigned as law-givers. With aid—historically—from colonial scholars, the Brahmins have generally imposed their own notion of culture in Hinduist India. This has resulted in the denigration of lower caste culture as vulgar and non-intellectual, and motivated the disappearance of folk performances from mainstream cultural style (13). Despite cultural persecution, Prakash evidences that these folk performances continue to provide a democratic space for those marginalised by caste hierarchies. His introduction emphasises that due to this history of caste hierarchy in India, folk culture and ‘classical styles’ have been allocated and conceptualised as two distinct practices; the former being mostly absent from the syllabus of modern education in India. Therefore, his research intends to amend this lack of representation in the academic field so that its practices and practitioners can ‘make their presence felt’ (9). Prakash argues that this negligence towards the folk culture is due to its performers being generally regarded as ‘untouchables’ (Shudra or Dalit) who pollute and shame their society; a bias that results in their work not being considered an ‘ideal form of performance’ (13).

Prakash implements various theories from theatre and performance studies such as landscape, materiality, viscosity, performativity, and choreopolitics to explore the aesthetics of folk

performance and analyse why it is comparatively deemed less culturally important, focusing predominantly on examples from the states of Bihar and Telangana. Prakash's case studies evidently justify his claims of social and academic inattention towards folk culture, while illuminating the reader on its value and importance in performing arts. The first chapter, 'Historiography: Performance between Traces and Trash', emphasises the urgent need for scholarly work on the historiography of Indian folk performances to redress its problematic demarcation in comparison to legacies of 'colonial and elite theatre' (54). Prakash elaborates that his approach of understanding the historiography of folk performance is through 'examining how theatre and performance history came to be written as it is, considering the approach that shaped theatre history writings in the nineteenth and twentieth centur[ies]' (56). In one such example he refers to the foundational Sanskrit text of the *Natyasastra*, which evidences that the marginalisation of folk artists was always a part of Hindu culture; and though encouraged by the British colonial government, it was not initiated by their regime (57). Although Prakash accepts that colonial writers misunderstood folk culture and did not consider it art, he surmises that it was originally the elite Brahmin caste 'who did not appreciate folk performances' (69). This informative and challenging argument demystifies the view championed by many Indian nationalists that British imperialists were solely to blame for the degradation and humiliation of folk artists in India.

In the second and third chapters, Prakash discusses the theatrical theories of landscape and materiality and formulates these concepts for analysis in folk culture through two examples from Bihar. Prakash believes that the theory of landscape and materiality drastically alters when applied to folk culture, such as when 'space which could be identified as a wild forest through a colonial or mainstream gaze acquires new meaning through this subaltern performance' (97). Similarly, in folk performance, 'a high level of visibility of materiality both in forms of bodily assertion and as well as in objectification of the body' (135) could be seen, which explains the different attitudes of marginalised and elite caste towards



obscenity and aesthetic judgment. Focusing on the landscape in the Bhuiyan Puja celebration and materiality in the Bidesiya folk style, Prakash describes how the elite caste and colonial scholars through written history have made 'subaltern community members believe that their folk culture is inferior, and they do not have any creativity' (101). Furthermore, he explains that the cultural propaganda of the elite caste establishes a different landscape and materiality for folk culture in comparison to the elite culture; for instance the practices of depicting violence, praying to demons, and performing nude have been assigned to sites inhabited by subaltern communities. Therefore, Prakash illustrates in these two chapters that it was members of the elite caste who constructed distinctions of morality to creative styles in the written history of performing arts in India. Moreover, these elites neglected to provide a platform for subaltern citizens to voice their perspective or defend their culture.

The last three chapters contain the theoretical highlights of the book, where Prakash employs the concepts of viscerality, performativity, and choreopolitics. He elaborates on how they reveal the ways in which folk performance provides a voice to subaltern communities. He argues that the viscerality of these performances develop a sense of community when 'an energetic flow of verbal and gesture communication takes place between the audience and artists' (176). Such impromptu energetic gestures are a crucial part of the folk culture as exemplified by Dugola performance, in which artists use erotic bodily movements to create a bonding between the members of the subaltern community. Prakash suggests that such performances 'obliterate the capacity of Dalits to see hierarchy and hidden injustice' (197), making them believe that they are equal, which in return forces social elites to go against the presence of viscerality in folk performance. The myth of Dalits being the servants of the higher castes is diluted by providing these so-called untouchables with a democratic space and allowing them to imagine their equality, which opposes the theology of orthodox Hinduism. Prakash further argues that such limitations and powerlessness creates performativity of its own and allows Dalit folk artists to challenge the

notion of morality established by the elite caste. The presence of Gaddar (a theatre activist) and Jana Natya Mandali (a theatre organisation) in Telengana are prime examples mentioned by Prakash in his last chapter that illustrate how Dalit activists have used theatre and the theory of choreopolitics to fight for an equal society and question the caste hierarchy in Hinduism.

*Cultural Labour* does have its limitations, however. Prakash often mentions the restrictions of hierarchy in folk performance—‘[c]aste determines where one can perform and where one cannot’—but this becomes repetitive rather than particularly advancing his arguments (20, 93, 238, 288). Additionally, despite India’s religious diversity, the focus on Hindu folk performance somewhat excludes the nation’s other marginalised groups. A further exploration of performance in Islamic sub-cultures, for example, may have alleviated this problematic aspect of the book and offered a broader overview of folk performance in India. Still, *Cultural Labour* remains a timely and essential text for any scholar of South Asian culture. Prakash’s focus on redressing hitherto overlooked forms of theatre and performance is both highly laudable and insightful. It allows readers to build a better understanding of a culture that has been neglected by the performing arts world and historically suppressed by certain groups. The different theatre theories mentioned by Prakash serve as useful tools to explain how folk performance establishes ‘an alternative mode of thinking, conceptualising and communication’ (288), which questions the socio-cultural issues associated with subaltern styles and challenges the denigrating views of elite caste and colonial scholars. Overall, *Cultural Labour Conceptualising the Folk Performance in India* is a transgressive and sincere effort to highlight the presence of caste hierarchy in Hinduist India and the role of folk performance to demystify the notion of morality.

***Rehearsing Revolutions: The Labor Drama Experiment and the Radical Activism in the Early Twentieth Century***  
by Mary McAvoy

Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2019, 266 pp. (hardcopy)

By Alessandro Simari

Mary McAvoy's *Rehearsing Revolutions* is well situated within a growing corpus in the field of theatre history that focuses upon the intersection of labour politics and performance in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. McAvoy differentiates her monograph from similarly situated historical studies—such as the works of scholars Chrystyna Dail, Colette A. Hyman, and Ann Folino White—by its narrow focus on drama programmes established within American labour colleges during the interwar period. The structure of the book is shaped by the five labour colleges that are taken as subjects for historical survey and analysis: Portland Labor College (Oregon); Brookwood Labor College (Katonah, New York); Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry (various locations around Asheville, North Carolina); Highlander Folk School (Monteagle, Tennessee); and Commonwealth Labor College (Mena, Arkansas). McAvoy considers the theatrical activities undertaken within these institutions during a given period, and her historical analysis is focused primarily through close attention to the pedagogic practices of their respective drama instructors. Presenting these case studies in chronological order, McAvoy navigates the reader through a burgeoning American experiment with theatrical pedagogy as a form of radical political education for workers. Throughout, McAvoy reflects on the ways in which labour drama programmes (and their declared or alleged radical functions) were shaped by broader societal and political conditions, such as institutionalized forms of racism, the conservatism of labour unions, and Red Scare politics during the Progressive and New Deal eras.

The greatest strength of *Rehearsing Revolutions* is its clear and detailed presentation of an impressive array of archival records related

to the theatrical activities taking place within the walls of America's labour colleges. McAvoy's historical recounting and analysis leverages resources such as class plans, directors' reports, course materials, playscripts, newspaper coverage, conference speeches, and student interviews. A repeated occurrence identified by McAvoy across a number of the case studies was that many of the drama instructors who undertook the experimental work of labour-oriented theatrical pedagogy would later (in the context of political fear mongering over leftist politics) seek to distance themselves from or conceal their involvement with labour colleges once their own employment relationship with these institutions had concluded. For instance, biographical profiles of Doris Smith deliberately omitted mention of her leadership of Portland's Labor College Players once she began working for Portland Civic Theatre (56). McAvoy's historical analysis thus re-animates these often unexamined or unclaimed artistic, political, and pedagogical histories of American labour drama. Some theatre historians may find that the monograph's attention to this urgent project of historical recovery is too often deferred by a perhaps overgenerous supply of socio-political contextualisation. Nonetheless, McAvoy's historical narration effectively situates the reader within the artistic, institutional, and political *milieu* of a given labour college. This is exemplified by attentive readings of the increasingly radical one-act dramas performed by Hollace Ransdell and her students at the Southern Summer School and Hazel MacKaye's grappling with both philosophical questions and institutional obstacles in her attempt to develop a purposeful theatrical-educational programme for the students of Brookwood Labor College.

McAvoy is careful in her analysis to consider each labour drama programme on its own terms. For instance, her analysis is mindful of the specific ways that systemic racism shaped the political concerns and pedagogical practices of labour drama programmes in the context of the 'whites-only progressivism' of Portland (Chapter 2) as opposed to those programmes operating within the context of the repressive apparatuses set up through Jim Crow legislation (Chapters 4 through 6, but particularly Chapter 5 on Highlander Folk School). *Rehearsing*

*Revolutions* simultaneously proposes that the drama programmes here participate in a shared theatrical, pedagogical, and political lineage, as evidenced in the case study of Lee Hays (a former student of Highlander Folk School and drama instructor at Commonwealth Labor College). While the selected case studies are themselves interesting and provide McAvoy with abundant material for investigation, the monograph provides perhaps too brief an explanation as to the reasons why *these* specific programmes are to be taken as representative of ‘labor drama’s evolution’ (7). McAvoy identifies—to pick one example—geographic diversity as a criterion for case study selection. In this regard, it is not clear as to what historical conclusions a reader is expected to deduce (if any) from the fact that three of the five selected drama programmes are clustered in labour colleges located in south-eastern states. Is there something specific to the historical development of labour politics and/or the material conditions of production in this constellation of south-eastern states that make such localities more politically or culturally amenable to labour drama? Alternatively, what is to be surmised about the breadth of the labour drama movement given the absence of any case studies from the populous states of California or Texas, or in the states that comprise the American Midwest? McAvoy’s work is laudable for being one of the first substantive monographs on the American labour drama movement, yet a broader survey of the prevalence and relative importance of drama programmes within American labour colleges may have alleviated such historical and methodological ambiguities.

In addition to these opacities, the opening chapter of *Rehearsing Revolutions* raises a set of theoretical stakes that are not always maintained in the book’s subsequent historical analyses. McAvoy’s introduction asserts a conceptualisation of labour drama as political praxis that can, at times, seem unmoored from its subsequent historical analyses of the political functions of such programmes. As is pithily expressed in the title of the monograph, a worker’s involvement in theatrical production is understood as a ‘method of imagining and enacting emancipatory alternatives to the oppressive status quo of U.S. industry during the

interwar period' (3). The presentation of this theoretical understanding of labour drama in the monograph's opening chapter reads as jarringly optimistic when subsequently encountering a series of case studies in which such revolutionary potential is shown to have limited historical expression. McAvoy's analysis pinpoints—within the microcosm of a case study—the ways in which individual drama programmes were politically and institutionally conscribed by the material conditions in which they operated. Her historical analysis, however, shies away from engaging in a more comprehensive or inclusive assessment of American labour drama as a genre of revolutionary political activism that might have better enabled the reconciliation of this seeming contradiction. In a similar vein, McAvoy brings to the reader's attention the influence upon labour drama programmes of John Dewey's education philosophies, which are described as 'both an undeniably important component of these schools' missions and another form of experimentation within these institutions' (23). This may be the case, although further references to Dewey's philosophical emphasis on learning-by-doing are absent from the remainder of the monograph. Given the book's subject matter, this seems a particularly missed opportunity since Dewey's learning-by-doing theory of education might be understood as being consonant with conceptions of performativity that have been developed in performance studies scholarship. Dewey's philosophical and pedagogical influence upon labour education promises to be an important and fruitful topic for future scholarly study; as it stands, McAvoy's articulation of said influence in her introduction seemed to foreground an avenue of historical inquiry that was ultimately left untravelled in this monograph.

Still, it is a testament to McAvoy's judicious curation of archival materials and compelling presentation of subject matter that such further theoretical and historical questions so readily present themselves. As primarily a work of theatre history, McAvoy reconstructs—in often granular detail—a comprehensive view of the theatrical-pedagogical activities within a given labour college, in which theatrical performance is framed as an aesthetic, political, and pedagogical response in kind

to the labour politics of interwar America. In so doing, McAvoy has provided historical grist for scholars upon which subsequent political and formal theorizations about labour drama can be based. Both by virtue of the volume's historical subject matter and McAvoy's specific concern with the use of drama as a pedagogical and political tool, the scholarly appeal of *Rehearsing Revolutions* extends as much to theatre historians of twentieth-century America as to scholars and practitioners of applied theatre.

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