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Duckie in the Community: Performance, Audience and Social Engagement

Sample chapter: 'On exporting and instrumentalising queer fun'

This sample chapter could be considered as a first draft of, or notes towards, chapters three and four of my doctoral thesis as laid out in the accompanying prospectus. Respectively (and provisionally) entitled 'On exporting queer fun' and 'On instrumentalising queer fun', these chapters follow chapter one, 'On creating a queer tribe', which lays out the company history of the performance collective Duckie and the development of their regular Saturday night club into larger-scale events, theatrical runs and social-outreach projects, and their securing of Arts Council England Regular Funded Organisation status in 2002 (redesignated National Portfolio Organisation status in 2015); and chapter two, 'On consciously self-replicating a queer tribe', which uses the D.H.S.S. project, Duckie's summer school for young performers, as a case study in how a performance collective can combine shrewd entrepreneurialism with a utopic vision rooted in queer futurity to fortify and promote its own institutional status, working practices and cultural sensibility. In this sample chapter, I will use the Posh Club – Duckie's afternoon club for people aged 60 and older, which has been running in Crawley, Sussex, since 2012 and had a ten-week trial run in Hackney in January-March 2015 – as a case study in two distinct but connected areas. First, how practices developed by a predominantly queer performance collective for predominantly queer audiences can be applied to an ostensibly non-queer context; and second, how the aims and strategies of a company like Duckie can shift in response to changes in arts organisations' access to various

kinds of public subsidy and the implications of this for the political impact of that collective's work on wider society. In the finished doctoral thesis, these chapters will be followed by two more. One chapter, 'On the limits of utopia', uses the Slaughterhouse Club, Duckie's outreach project working with people with multiple exclusions (including homelessness and drug and alcohol use), as a case study to explore the limits of utopic queer futurity as a mode for publicly subsidised projects whose funding is predicated on their ability to deliver measurable improvements to participants' wellbeing and cost to public services. Another chapter, 'On defending the tribal home', uses Duckie's role in the currently ongoing campaign to defend its 'home' site, the LGBTQ pub and performance venue the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, from commercial redevelopment as a case study in the pressures exerted by contemporary market forces and their supporting political structures on spaces of queer world-making and potential strategies of resistance to those forces.

Methodologically, I use a combination of ethnographic research (including interviews and participant observation drawing on approaches proposed by Tim May[1] and Barbara Tedlock[2] among others); analysis of data sets generated by Duckie's internal evaluation practices; and analysis of policy documentation related to the funding landscape.[3] The critical arguments of this draft chapter fall within two broad frameworks, corresponding to the plan in the prospectus for chapters three and four respectively: one that considers the Posh Club's operation and efficacy as a consciously socially turned project; another that asks what the operation of such a

[1] *Social Research* (2001)
[2] 'Ethnography and ethnographic representation', in Denzin and Lincoln (eds), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (2003), 165-213
[3] In my final thesis, due consideration will be given to the benefits and shortcomings of my methodological approach, with particular attention to participant-observer ethnography

project tells us about the position of arts organisations within a rapidly changing policy and funding landscape.

The first critical framework more or less adheres to the terms to which funders pay attention, and can perhaps be summarised as: is the Club good for its guests? That is to say, is the Posh Club a socially turned performance event with beneficial outcomes for those who attend? If so, what are the tactics by which Duckie achieves this, what continuities exist between these tactics and the way the company produces its other projects, and what generally applicable principles could be deduced from their study? This is an avenue whose exploration might contribute to the critical conversation about the social turn, or intersection between performance work and social engagement, with particular attention to debates around affect (as discussed by James Thompson[4]) and queer world-building (as discussed by Fiona Buckland[5]). The central argument here is that the Posh Club is successful in generating positive affect in ways beneficial to its guests; I also propose an argument that will be made in greater detail in the finished thesis about the strength of continuity between the Posh Club and earlier, more overtly queer Duckie projects.

The second critical framework zooms out to consider the significance of the fact that the terms to which funders pay attention are a crucial aspect of the conception and operation of a project like the Posh Club pilot in the first place. The Posh Club's Hackney pilot scheme serves as a case study in the pressures performance companies face to reconceptualise their work in order to navigate a changing funding landscape – one in which the subsidy of art by government is increasingly yoked to its capacity to deliver measurable benefits accountable to other policy areas, such as healthcare. This argument develops understanding of the operation of arts organisations under

[4] *Performance Affects* (2011)
[5] *Impossible Dance* (2002)

austerity, building in particular on arguments laid out by Jen Harvie[6] following Shannon Jackson[7] and Claire Bishop[8]. The conclusions here remain ambivalent, partly because they emerge from a timely context that continues to shift and develop, and partly because of the tensions inherent in an empathy-driven collective such as Duckie participating in a funding system predicated on the marketisation of public services along competitive, individualist lines. My research suggests that Duckie has the potential to thrive on these terms: the Posh Club pilot schemes shows it has the capacity to bid successfully on an open market for funding previously ringfenced for national or local governmental healthcare spending, and to demonstrate that it has been put to a use commensurate with the terms of a public sector marketised in line with neoliberal economic policy. What remains unknown at this stage is the extent to which success on those terms is compatible with a continued commitment to the promotion of empathy and collective experience.

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The origins of the Posh Club lie outside Duckie's established practice. The idea that would develop into the Club came in 2012, when Duckie producer Simon Casson's 84-year-old mother "wanted somewhere to go," in Casson's words[9]. She lived in Crawley, Sussex, and had few options for socialising so Casson's sister used to organise tea parties for her and a couple of friends at which they would dress smartly and Casson's sister would serve sandwiches and cake. "Why don't we make that into

[6] *Fair Play* (2013)
[7] *Social Works* (2011)
[8] *Artificial Hells* (2012)
[9] Personal interview, April 1 2015

something bigger?"[10] Casson wondered. They secured the local church hall for an event known initially as the Tuesday Club, and later as the Posh Club. It wasn't a Duckie production but Casson and his co-producer Dicky Eton started to book acts for the Club, including Duckie veterans. As with Duckie's flagship Saturday night event at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, the private, domestic desire to supply a perceived lack in options for socialising on one's own terms generated a public event that found a wider constituency and became an institution. "All of these things come out of the personal," Casson says. "It came from somewhere quite personal and quite normal like us sitting around this sitting room. What would we like to do now?"[11] Soon, the company applied for funding for the project, though not under the Duckie name, for bureaucractic reasons: they'd already applied to the same fund, Awards for All (which distributes National Lottery money to community causes), as a company and knew the fund's regulations limited repeat applications. "How can we leverage this in the right way?" Eton recalls thinking[12]. So they used a Crawley name and address and successfully applied as a standalone enterprise.

This demonstration of the company's familiarity with the procedures and requirements of funding practices evinced Duckie's ability to deploy entrepreneurial savvy in the service of a project conceived around empathy and collaboration. And so what started out as an idea for a family birthday party evolved into a performance-based project that proved effective in improving the wellbeing of members of a small town's older population. A questionnaire survey of 111 guests at the Posh Club in Crawley – carried out in 2015 by Emmy Minton, who works regularly with Duckie to secure funding for their work, often by conducting evaluation research – showed that

[10] Personal interview, April 1 2015
[11] Personal interview, April 1 2015
[12] Personal interview, April 1 2015

94 per cent of the Club's guests believed it helped them be more active and 98 per cent thought it helped them make more friends. Of 47 reporting disabilities, 41 said the Club made them less isolated and more active.[13] Such results are surely gratifying on an empathetic level but their existence is also indicative of the practices of self-reflexive evaluation that Duckie has cultivated. These too demonstrate the company's entrepreneurial savvy, for such data are collected in the knowledge that they will be an asset when it comes to applying for further funds on the basis of projects' impact on participants' lives.

Niall Weir is the vicar at St Paul's West Hackney, a Church of England church in Stoke Newington, east London, with a well-established programme of social-outreach projects aimed at groups including rough sleepers and street-based sex workers. Weir suggested to Casson that Duckie might bring the Posh Club to Hackney. Minton made successful applications to Awards for All and the Church Urban Fund, a national Church of England community fund, to underwrite a Posh Club Hackney pilot scheme at St Paul's church hall. This ran across 10 consecutive Wednesday afternoons, from roughly noon to 3pm, starting on January 21 and ending on March 25 2015. I haven't yet attended a Crawley Posh Club (although I intend to in the coming year) but went to nine out of the 10 events in the Hackney pilot scheme, and would like now to present some observations from that run. It's worth noting, however, that preparations began months before the first doors opened for the first event: performers had to be programmed and booked, publicity material created and distributed, the dressing of the venue planned and executed, catering planned for and organised, volunteers recruited and trained, and evaluation and documentation processes conceived. That these were all accomplished with a high level of efficacy

[13] Figures from internal Duckie evaluation document 'Crawley data2' supplied to me by Minton

speaks to Duckie's corporate experience and efficiency. The Club would also bear practical traces of Duckie's production experience in terms of its formal similarity to the company's Saturday night event: it offered a set format with a distinctive sensibility that balanced a consistent schedule with space for experimentation and the unknown, affording roughly equivalent weight to performance, dancing, refreshment and socialising. This seems an effective formula for attracting a dedicated constituency whose loyalty and affection for the event exist in vibrant tension with a sense of participation in and ownership over it (a facet that receives more sustained attention in the full thesis).

The Posh Club was planned for an audience of around 80, comprising local residents aged 60 or older and, in some cases, their children or carers. Guests were greeted on arrival by scrupulously polite volunteers dressed in traditional waiters' attire – black and white clothes and subtle jewellery, occasionally complemented by less traditional elements such as lipstick on boys or cropped hair on girls – and shown to their seats. The room, a conventional church hall, was elegantly dressed. Daylight was blocked out by black curtains studded with star-like encrustations, radiators obscured by faux-marble covers, the stage adorned with scalloped footlights (in faux-metal plastic), and pot plants and ornamental lamps were arranged around the perimeter. A pianist played upbeat songs and showtunes as guests were shown to their seats, at tables of eight. Places were largely distributed on a first-come-first-served basis though some more vulnerable guests had reserved seats nearer the front and larger groups would be seated together where possible. Over the course of the run, many guests became accustomed to sitting in specific places. As guests were seated, volunteers ferried tea and coffee to the tables from the kitchen, which opened onto the hall. Then food was served: plates of sandwiches and cake-stands bedecked with tarts,

fairy cakes, chocolate fingers and biscuits, alongside scones with cream and jam. Then came the first of the afternoon's performance segments, with Eton serving as compere, welcoming the guests and introducing an act or two. Despite being new to the role, Eton quickly established a warm, chatty tone, sometimes with an edge of mock-sternness to encourage attention if necessary. The afternoon would then alternate between periods of performing and periods of socialising before the event's scheduled conclusion at 3pm (though it often ran over by 10 or 20 minutes). Minton has overseen detailed qualitative research on the event to which I will eventually have access but informal observation suggested a fairly consistent demographic make-up of guests: around 70 per cent were female and ethnicity was mixed across the group, comprising about 45 per cent Afro-Caribbean, 40 per cent white and 15 per cent Asian. Some tables were all-female or single-ethnicity but most were mixed.

The performance parts of the afternoon were consistently met with an attentive and enthusiastic reception. Overall there was an emphasis on dance, music and comedy, the general tone conventional, even conservative by the standards of Duckie's overall performance history but mixed with occasional more provocative elements. Typical acts included 'flapper' dancers the Bees' Knees; local young singer Asabi Hawah; old-school gags and crooning by Steve Barclay, including a music-hall singalong and tributes to Max Miller and Ken Dodd; and soprano Jennifer Coleman, who encouraged the audience to sing along to 'O Sole Mio' with the words to the Cornetto advert using the same tune. There were three Elvis tribute acts over the course of the run, one white, one black, one Chinese. This emphasis on accessibility and palatability constitutes an implicit subscription to Jen Harvie's rebuttal of Claire Bishop's preference for antagonism in socially turned work on the basis that "pleasurable fun can constructively engage audiences while dissent's bad feeling can

risk alienating them"[14]. All the same, there were potentially challenging performances too, including burlesque acts by Mysti Vine and Missa Blue involving partial nudity, and a quick-change routine from Jess Love and Ursula Martinez that concluded with their stripping to reveal their breasts. These all got a mildly scandalised but positive response. Matthew Robbins's gently gay hand-animated love story 'Flyboy Has a Dream About Mothboy' was warmly received too. The most interesting turn in this respect was a solo dance number choreographed by Joseph Mercier and performed by Jordan Lennie that held the audience in rapt attention. Lennie walked onto stage naked, belying the gasps, whoops and cheers of the audience with a neutral, nonchalant affect before slowly putting on ballet pumps, a jockstrap and black waist-to-knee tights. In the first part of the act, set to music from *Swan Lake*, he sucked in his body cavity before moving his arms like a bird's wings, his movements slow, tortuous, beautiful and poised; in the second part, set to Carl Orff's *Gassenhauer* (used in the score of the film *Badlands*), he used a sensuous, undulating go-go vocabulary before finally stripping naked again, this time somewhat coquettishly, and leaving the stage to huge applause. The performance was referred to throughout the rest of the event, both on stage and off, catalysing various kinds of positive affect-exchange between those present.

"This is the best of Duckie," James Hadley – Duckie's Arts Council England relationship manager – told me in conversation at the Club immediately after Lennie's performance. A milder overall tone was not, he asserted, the same as a diminution of the company's commitment to challenging audiences: "I thought it might be sort of watered down, but not at all." This response invites the question of what constitutes the "best of Duckie". And while providing a platform for challenging performance is

[14] *Fair Play*, 10

undoubtedly part of the answer, it is not the only – perhaps not even the most important – one. Other parts no less germane to the present consideration of the Posh Club include the generation of positive affect around shared experiences of both performance and socialising. It's notable that in a questionnaire survey organised by Minton over the course of the run, only three guests made reference to performance while 12 referred explicitly to the event's setting and affect.[15]

In chapter one, I describe how a sense of 'queer fun' – shared experiences of politicised performance and pleasurable socialising predicated on the defiant celebration of outsider experience of sexuality and gender – is at the heart of Duckie's company history and tribal identity. A few challenging acts notwithstanding, the Posh Club seems to be a distinctly non-queer event, with very little overt acknowledgement of non-straight experience. That characterisation is troubled, however, by certain peripheral aspects of the event that could be described as 'quietly queer'. One example would be the unconventional gender identities of some of the volunteers, who included a young genderqueer female with cropped hair, a young man who wore earrings, lipstick, nail varnish and a skirt, and a middle-aged woman sporting suit and tie, barbered hair and a flat chest. In an interview with me, the younger volunteers reported that some guests were curious or even confused about their gender identity but expressed their interest in good-natured rather than hostile ways, and they responded in kind. Elsewhere, there is anecdotal evidence that potential variance in sexuality has not been registered. Weir told me in conversation during one Posh Club that a female guest had told him she couldn't stand "homosexuals and perverts" – apparently not realising she'd just been happily chatting to a volunteer whose lesbian identity would be obvious to any Duckie regular. To the extent that sexual or gender

[15] Figures from internal Duckie evaluation document 'Hackney Posh Questionnaire 1' supplied to me by Minton

queerness is acknowledged at the Posh Club, then, it generally falls under the category of what Sarah Ahmed calls the "happy queer", whose difference, expressed through equanimity, implicitly affirms a moderate status quo, rather than the mode of being "happily queer", or taking pleasure in defying normative expectations through deviance and troublemaking, that more closely characterises the 'queer fun' characteristic of most of Duckie's past events.[16] All the same, the Posh Club can be construed as an event that applies to an ostensibly non-queer setting tribalising or, in Buckland's phrase, "world-making" tactics honed in an explicitly queer context, and with the same basic intention: to create a sense of commonality within a group subjected to marginalisation (restricted access to participation in mainstream society) on account of an inalienable aspect of their identity (in this case certain attributes of older age). There's a queerness to that regardless of its participants' sexuality or gender. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed suggests that those who have been "undone by suffering" can serve as "agents of ethical transformation", using their status as "affect aliens" to create life-worlds predicated on wants and needs different from those of the normative mainstream.[17] She leaves unexplored the practical implications of this intriguing prospect. The Posh Club offers an opportunity to explore those implications – and, I argue, to demonstrate that the tactics of queer fun can indeed be exported to other contexts.

The Posh Club generated a great deal of positive affect. It had an unmistakeable buzz about it, a frisson of occasion, enthusiasm and open-heartedness. It was a smiley place. The environment was calculated to make guests feel special, from the charming, solicitous affect of organisers and volunteers to the bespoke decor at both macro and micro levels, conveying a sense of luxury and 'specialness' to which its

[16] Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), 117
[17] *The Promise of Happiness*, 216

guests rose, performing their own roles with enthusiasm. This was most evident in the way that almost all guests accepted the organisers' invitation to "dress posh", with a range of chic and elegant outfits on show every week, from vintage dresses and gowns to flamboyantly sequined berets. Although men were in the minority, the event offered an opportunity for those with peacock tendencies to show off their plumage. (This is arguably another 'quietly queer' element of the event and one explored in greater depth in the finished thesis, as is the whole area of dress and fashion at the Posh Club.) The sense of guests playing a role themselves was crucial to the event's success in several respects. Ideas of immanent theatricality and fluidity between the roles of performer and audience were encouraged by the stage-focused sections of the event, whose cabaret mode operated without a fourth wall but with frequent interplay between stage and seating areas. Shout-outs were often delivered from the stage to the audience on, for instance, the occasion of a guest's birthday, which might also be marked with a cake or bouquet of flowers. Some professional acts (singer Lili La Scala, performance poet Abe Gibson) referred explicitly to the local area or the venue itself; others (comic Steve Barclay, comedy character Ida Barr) took the experience old age as the subject of performance. Sometimes a more direct aesthetic collaboration occurred: Tammy Whynot (aka Lois Weaver) incorporated into her act guests' comments about their experiences of old age, sex and relationships, and photographs of guests taken earlier that afternoon. Going between the stage and the 'dressing room' (in fact the church proper, whose repurposing could be construed as another quietly queer aspect of the Club), acts walked through the main space; some incorporated this journey into their performance while others engaged in conversation or posed for photos after performing – de facto assertions of commonality between those on stage and those off it. And towards the end of the run, guests were

programmed into the show as performers in their own right, in so-called 'Posh Club Spots', making porous the boundary between guest and performer. The boundary between performers and volunteers was also porous: one week, H Plewis – a regular Duckie act who volunteered throughout this Posh Club run – was 'coaxed' on stage to sing as if she were an untried performer; another week, half a dozen volunteers filed on stage to act as Paul L Martin's impromptu backing dancers. And the boundary between guest and volunteer was porous too: at least one person first came to the Club as a guest but then returned in subsequent weeks as a volunteer, while some guests of the Club volunteered regularly in other local community projects. All of this promoted a sense of familiarity, fellow-feeling and group identity – one which, it should be noted, was buoyed by the fact that some guests were regular attendees at other church-run events held in the same space, such as an over-50s dance event. Their sense of ownership of the space predated Duckie's, and in some respects – depth of relationship with Weir, knowledge of local amenities – trumped it. The Posh Club was itself a guest at St Paul's, West Hackney.

This fluidity between participants' roles in a given event is central to how the Posh Club can inform our understanding of the social turn. Socially turned performance is typically critically considered in terms of productions generated and delivered by performers and companies and watched or consumed by audiences. Within this framework, critical attention is often predicated on the idea of such projects' efficacy. Are their terms worthwhile, and how effectively do they achieve them? Jackson, for instance, asks us to consider socially turned performance projects as "art forms that help us to imagine sustainable social institutions…exploring forms of interdependent support"[18]. But what if a project does more than help us to imagine

[18] *Social Works*, 14

such things? What if it in fact realises them, even if only within a particularly delineated time and place? In the introduction to the book about Lone Twin, *Good Luck Everybody*, editors David Williams and Carl Lavery note that "art making is always, and before all else, a social practice"[19]. The Posh Club is a vivid instance of this practice: the production and consumption of the event function as a collective and dynamic social practice in themselves. In consuming the Club – and thereby generating a large proportion of its emotional affect and an increasing amount of on-stage performance – the guests become its makers. At the same time, in certain respects – including their reception of emotional affirmation and, as mentioned, their status as welcomed interlopers in a space of pre-existing community use – its makers are also its guests.

One of the most striking ways in which guests 'made' the Posh Club was through dancing. From the first week, a boogie was scheduled at the end of the event's three-hour slot but over the course of the run the role of dancing increased in importance. Audience dancing would begin earlier in the event as the result of a kind of good-natured, negotiated, permission-giving exchange of affects. Sometimes guests started dancing at their tables during an interval or a musical act, and were encouraged by volunteers or organisers. On other occasions, Casson started dancing himself – big, fun disco moves that get the room smiling. Some of the Club's most memorable moments came about through off-stage dancing: particular instances include Eton dancing at length with one guest and Casson engaging in a prolonged routine with another guest in which he repeatedly pretended to hurl himself into her arms. In the former case, I counted nine people on neighbouring tables who were made to laugh and smile by the dancing; the latter case caught the attention of the

[19] *Good Luck Everybody*, 13

whole room, to whoops of pleasure and applause. Both seem like clear instances of the transmission of affect as a crucial component of the event's success. (My own more modest equivalent experience was having a guest remove the drink from my hand so that we could dance together for a song, telling me, "it's like Club 18-30!" – just one aspect of the observer-participant ethnographer dynamic that will be more substantively engaged with in the finished thesis.)

In *Impossible Dance*, Fiona Buckland devotes sustained attention to dancing within the queer clubs of downtown New York in the 1980s and 1990s in ways that bear on Duckie's work in general and the Posh Club in particular. "Improvised social dancing offered empowerment and a pleasurable form of queer world-making," she writes. "It could embody and rehearse a powerful political imagination, which, while not always utopian or even complete, had agency in queer world-making."[20] Rather than generating consciously aesthetic outcomes – art – such dancing has primarily social value, she asserts. "The collaboration between dancers and DJs and dancers and other dancers produced pleasure through valuing exchange; this reflected a utopic imagination."[21] And she notes that while dancing sometimes appeals because of the enjoyment of music in the body (the 'push'), sometimes the primary pleasure of dancing derives from the sense of participation in a group identity (the 'pull') – the sense of "both its opposition to alienation from the body, from others, from the environment that is part of the experience of living in a late twentieth-century city, and because of the autonomous pleasure of moving"[22], a sense of participation in what Richard Schechner has called a "collective special theatrical life".[23] Although these observations apply specifically to experiences in queer club spaces, they seem

[20] *Impossible Dance*, 65
[21] *Impossible Dance*, 66
[22] *Impossible Dance*, 80
[23] *Between Theater and Anthropology* (1985), 11

perfectly applicable to the experience of the Posh Club, emphasising how queer world-making tactics can be exported to other contexts of marginalisation. The 'autonomous pleasure of moving' might have an added layer of significance for some guests with health problems or restricted mobility. Dancing from a wheelchair is dancing all the same. (I would also like to explore whether improvised utopic social dancing is something shared by queer clubs and certain church congregations, perhaps including St Paul's, West Hackney itself. If so, the Posh Club might serve as a bridge between these two instances of the same phenomenon.)

Another key aspect of the Club's cultivation of a group identity was the use of ritual. Within the consistent basic format of the event were located specific shared activities, such as the service of a glass of sparkling wine (or fruit juice) for each guest ahead of a toast, a raffle draw (with tickets given out for free), and the repeated use of Pharrell's 2014 chart hit 'Happy' as the first song of the concluding dance period. The combination of elements of ritual with a known and anticipated schedule, stylish formal dress, the service of food and drink, alternation between kinds of public speech and performance and generalised socialising, and a central role for dancing brought to mind a wedding – another occasion that combines formality and ritual with celebration and commonality, in which everyone has a role to play but a sense of greater occasion suffuses all interaction. The sense of reciprocal happiness was underlined at the final event, when one regular guest wrote a poem celebrating the Club on a paper napkin and gave it to the producers, and others brought gifts of food: fishcakes, two cakes and two boxes of chocolates with an accompanying thank-you card.

This enthusiasm was confirmed in other ways. The Club's popularity was evident from the number of guests: it was intended to serve up to 80 per event but the

actual figures, week by week, were 77, 86, 94, 93, 132, 134, 158, 158, 149 and 156.[24] By the fourth week, the whole run was booked out and seating arrangements had to be revised to increase the room's capacity. According to a questionnaire written by Minton and filled out by 100 guests, *everybody* had a good time at the event. When asked the open question "What do you think of the Posh Club?", all respondents gave positive responses: 31 called it "very good", 13 said "fantastic", 11 said "great", nine said "wonderful" and six called it "excellent". More detailed responses to the same question included: "a nice way of bringing people together, getting dres up [sic] and feeling special", "very good please keep it up for lonely people", "something to look forward to", "friendly people makes you feel comfortable and happy to attend", "a good idea because it will encourage people living on their own to get out", "they make my heart happy and young again", "a different world", "excellent welcome" and "we feel VISIBLE and well catered for". When asked, "If the Posh Club was on every week do you think that it would make people feel part of a community in Stoke Newington?" every respondent said yes[25]. The Club was also considered a success by all of those I interviewed. These included Casson, Eton, Minton, Weir, Hadley, designer Tim Spooner, caterers Philip Vine and Lorraine Trevarthen, St Paul's congregant and regular volunteer Linda Green, three other volunteers, and seven guests. (Material from these interviews will be incorporated into the final thesis.) All agree on the Club's power as a machine for generating positive affect and fellow feeling. The Club also attracted positive media coverage from the *Hackney Gazette*, *Time Out London*, Radio 4's *Saturday Live* and others.

[24] Figures from internal Duckie evaluation document 'Hackney Posh attendance' supplied to me by Minton
[25] All responses from internal Duckie evaluation document 'Hackney Posh Questionnaire 1' supplied to me by Minton

In *Performance Affects*, Thompson pays sustained attention to the importance of feeling within performance projects conceived with social good in mind. The Posh Club isn't exactly applied theatre in the sense that Thompson uses it, as a process for reflecting audience members' direct experiences back at them in an aestheticised way through collaboration (although as we've seen, these elements aren't entirely absent from the Club). Even so, several concepts discussed by Thompson apply to the Club, not least his encouragement to consider an event's emotional and psychological affect as carefully as its aesthetic and intellectual effect, and to pay attention to "bits of practice" that generate positive affect – "the aspects that practitioners and participants might relish, such as joy, fun, pleasure or beauty, but rarely appear in the articulated intentions, funding applications or evaluation reports that surround the field"[26]. (I will take 'joy', 'fun', 'pleasure' or 'beauty' to be synonymous with positive affect.) Given that enhancement of wellbeing is one of the explicit aims of the Posh Club, it could be construed as just such a rare case in which affective "bits" are indeed consciously cultivated rather than seen as "accidental or peripheral"[27].

Thompson also describes a symbiotic relationship between entertainment and efficacy, which he characterises as an "affective transaction between individuals, groups and their wider community" in which the sensation of enjoyment is "the dynamic texture of the work through which it finds its force"[28]. There's a certain overlap here with what Harvie refers to as 'applied art' – projects that aim "to collaborate artistically and socially with a particular (often socially marginalized) group of people. Applied projects tend to emphasize socially meaningful (and usually

[26] *Performance Affects*, 115
[27] *Performance Affects*, 116
[28] *Performance Affects*, 131

'positive') processes, sometimes more than artistic outcomes"[29] – and that, she says, places them beyond her remit. I would argue that the success of the Posh Club troubles, perhaps to the point of nonsensicality, supposed distinctions between socially and aesthetically motivated practice, or between the texture and the force of such projects. The medium is the message; the enjoyment *is* the work. The Posh Club's social function is delivered through its theatricalising of the site in which it takes place, creating a space of immanent performance and positive fellow feeling. Its basic lesson is that the overall generation of affect within a space is as important as and perhaps more important than the aesthetic content of the work around which it is constructed. In *Impossible Dance*, Buckland quotes Stephen, a queer African-American New Yorker, on nightclubs as "wonderful, fabulous spaces" – sites that, Buckland notes, "were fabulous in themselves and simultaneously through [Stephen's] participation enabled him to be fabulous"[30]. 'Wonderful' and 'fabulous' are both words used by respondents to Minton's survey when asked to describe the Club. Their use in both instances speaks to the potential for tactics learned through queer world-building to be exported to other contexts – in this case, older residents of a given area at risk of isolation – and to enable other people to be fabulous too.

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But can being fabulous pay the bills? It might sound glib but this is a version of the crucial question underlying the project of the Posh Club and, to an extent, Duckie's ongoing fortunes. The collective's identity has been defined by its commitment to 'queer fun' (which could be thought of as one of the means by which one can 'be

[29] *Fair Play*, 20
[30] *Impossible Dance*, 37

fabulous'), and I have argued above that the Posh Club demonstrates how the tactics of queer fun can be exported to create events benefiting an ostensibly non-queer (yet still marginalised) population. I want now to consider the implications of such an approach within the funding and policy frameworks of austerity Britain, in particular the way that changes to these frameworks put certain kinds of pressure on performance companies seeking any kind of public subsidy. In more specific terms, the Posh Club pilot in Hackney can serve as a useful case study in how, in order to secure public money, companies like Duckie are obliged to reconceptualise their work not as an aesthetic undertaking, or even one bearing cultural meaning or value, but instead as a vehicle for the enhancement of wellbeing in the community – by means of which it also serves as an instrument of cost reduction for frontline services such as health and social care. The Posh Club is, so far, a success story considered on these terms. It shows that queer fun can be instrumentalised in ways harmonious with neoliberal policy aims. But this very success raises the question of whether such success can be achieved without sacrificing core values such as empathy and collaboration in favour of competition and individuality. Given that the practicalities of these issues remain both timely and subject to great change, definitive answers are hard to find so I propose provisional arguments with differing implications.

Public subsidy of performance projects has prompted a range of arguments within the critical conversation around the social turn. Bishop, for instance, has more confidence in the terms of the art market than in what she describes as the compromised situation of accepting government funding in the name of "the artificial generation of an audience for a participatory work"[31]. In Shannon Jackson's paraphrase of Bishop's argument in *Social Works*, "art practices that seek to correct

[31] Referred to by Jackson, *Social Works*, 26 (original reference TBC)

social ills – i.e., those that 'do good' – risk becoming overly instrumentalized, banalizing the formal complexities and interrogative possibilities of art under the homogenizing umbrella of a social goal"[32]. Engaging with Bishop's arguments, Jackson pushes back against a knee-jerk anti-institutionalism that she argues could bolster neoliberalism by unquestioningly internalising market terms. Yet Jackson also accepts elements of Bishop's argument about the potential limitations of government (or indeed philanthropic) backing:

> the funding that does remain available through foundation or public grants for US artists to work in schools, in prisons, in militaries, in hospitals, and in other under-funded state institutions provides both a welcome avenue of artistic support and the lurking anxiety that artists are being asked to pick up the pieces of US educational, health, and welfare systems that have been increasingly 'rolled back.' In such situations, systemic support for the arts paradoxically can use the arts as a vehicle for training citizens to seek 'individual solutions to systemic problems,' to recall Ulrich Beck. Such artistic palliatives offer therapeutic rehabilitation, temporary pride, or imaginative escape in once-a-week artist visits that are not reciprocally empowered to reimagine the political economic landscape of participants.[33]

So are companies seeking to effect meaningful change in the community damned if they do and damned if they don't – complicit either by dint of their direct participation as entrepreneurial lone agents in a marketised cultural economy that values and rewards individualism and competition above empathy and cooperation, or by dint of accepting handouts from a political superstructure dedicated to the promotion of the same values? And what if a company doesn't just succeed in generating "sustainable social institutions…exploring forms of interdependent support" as a byproduct of its artistic practice (as Jackson writes elsewhere and I have quoted above[34]) but is actually expected to do so as a condition of its funding – and to do so in place of state health and social care provision?

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[32] Referred to by Jackson, *Social Works*, 47 (original reference TBC)
[33] *Social Works*, 27
[34] *Social Works*, 14

Bishop and Jackson take a US-centric context for granted but a similar set of concerns apply in the UK. Jen Harvie offers a particularly helpful anatomisation of such pressures in the British context in *Fair Play*, which unpacks through its main argument both the pressures on arts organisations to behave like entrepreneurs (including an increased prioritisation of commercial success) and the tendency of socially turned performance to prioritise values of individualism. Duckie makes for a valuable case study in this context for a couple of reasons. Its chronology maps quite neatly onto the timeframe for the accelerated marketisation of the arts sector proposed by Harvie. Coming into being barely a year before New Labour took office, Duckie in many ways exhibits the portfolio of entrepreneurial skills Harvie identifies as representative of the new creative economy: "constant innovation, a willingness to adapt organisational and business models, and an openness to change"[35]. But while Duckie exemplifies this shift, it also resists it, consistently rejecting the promotion of individualism and competition in both subject matter and working practices. Indeed, Harvie uses Duckie as an example of groups that can be considered "models of networked collaboration"[36] rather than self-interest, working through corporate structures that resist "atomization by retaining and expanding strong social networks of support"[37].

When it comes to financial operation, Duckie has pursued a mixed economy. Its flagship Saturday night event is commercially viable on the basis of its door charge. For its larger vintage and theatrical projects, the company has consistently proved itself commercially viable within the terms of its various sources of funding without ever pursuing a profit-oriented strategy to capitalise on popular successes. (The *C'est*

[35] *Fair Play*, 70
[36] *Fair Play*, 88
[37] *Fair Play*, 82

Barbican show, for instance, which was a critical and commercial hit and toured internationally, could conceivably have been developed into a far more powerful commercial machine.) In other words, the company has been successful as a small-scale private enterprise (Saturdays) and on the terms of traditional arts funding – terms that have varied but remain more or less wedded to aesthetic and cultural innovation and the building and maintaining of audiences for explicitly arts-related events. This model – of accountability not to the imperatives of commercial success per se but to those of operative sustainability and publicly-funded public culture – has served Duckie well in the past and should continue to do so for as long as it maintains its Saturday-night constituency and its status as an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (assuming respectively, for the sake of argument, that it retains access to the Royal Vauxhall Tavern on the terms it has enjoyed for two decades, and that the material benefits of NPO status remain in place).

But projects such as the Posh Club, the Slaughterhouse Club and D.H.S.S. sit outside this model. In financial terms, they are accountable to neither small-scale commercial viability nor to the traditional terms of public arts funding. Instead, with these projects, Duckie finds itself accountable to the imperatives of charitable funding and outsourced health and social-care policy frameworks. This is a situation unanticipated in *Fair Play* – though it is consistent with some of the concerns Harvie explores related to a discourse of "soft social engineering". Referring back to Bishop, Harvie describes this as the pressure placed on arts companies to "intrumentalize art to fulfil policies of social inclusion – a cost-effective way of justifying public spending on the arts while diverting attention away from the structural causes of decreased social participation, which are political and economic (welfare, transport,

education, healthcare, etc.)"[38]. Writing in the early days of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition that governed the UK from 2010 to 2015, Harvie is justifiably exercised about the consequences of the reduction of government funding to the arts, already in place at the time of her writing and now set to accelerate following the election of Conservative majority government in May 2015. *Fair Play* notes the dangers of arts funding being increasingly pegged to 'outcomes' (to use the term now popular in policy discourse) in fields other than those directly related to the arts, even as direct investment in those other fields is also cut back. Harvie's book does not explore the possibility of a more radical shift, which has indeed taken place, and of which Duckie stands to be a major beneficiary. Even as arts funding shrinks, the opening up of other parts of the economy to market forces offers potentially even larger funding opportunities to arts companies – as long as they predicate their case not on aesthetic innovation or audience building but on their ability to deliver outcomes formerly considered the responsibility of national or local government, including benefits to health and social welfare, and therefore to reduce costs to frontline services. If it is to retain access to public subsidy of any kind, the whole arts sector faces pressure to make itself explicitly amenable and accountable to the neoliberal terms of quantifiability and cost-benefit analysis as never before.

One indicative document here is 'Standards of Evidence for Impact Investing', by Ruth Puttick and Joe Ludlow, published in 2012 by Nesta. Formerly the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, Nesta is now an independent charity that administers hundreds of millions of pounds derived from National Lottery money. Its £25 million Nesta Impact Investments fund was launched in 2012 to back projects bringing about social change – in particular in the areas of ageing,

[38] *Fair Play*, 9

community sustainability, and children and young people – under explicitly market-oriented terms. "The prospect of being able to tackle social challenges whilst making a profit is an attractive proposition,"[39] it asserts, while arguing that "too often evidence of impact is missing. We need evidence to establish whether a product or service is benefitting those it sets out to serve, and then to focus investment on products and services that can make the most difference." The paper states that "Nesta impact investments aim to deliver public benefit within the target outcome areas, whilst achieving a financial return"[40] and repeatedly describes Nesta as an "investor"[41] while referring to those applying for funding as "entrepreneurs"[42] whose proposed project is considered as a "venture"[43] expected to be "achieving a financial return"[44].

Comparably salutary is Resolving Chaos, an organisation created in 2010 as a "spin-out from the Department of Health"[45] before becoming a community interest company in 2012 and being awarded £9.7 million from the Big Lottery Fund in January 2014. Its remit relates to people with multiple needs, such as homeless drug addicts, who "often lead chaotic lives, which can be costly to public services. At Resolving Chaos we work with commissioners and providers to help identify people with multiple needs – and to make an economic case for commissioning the right support services to help them."[46] One of its slogans is "Saving Money Saving Lives" and "economic case-making" is central to its work: its website include case studies telling us, for instance, about George, a 38-year-old agoraphobic alcoholic with multiple heath issues and a history of violence whose "behaviour costs the tax payer

[39] Puttick and Ludlow, 'Standards of Evidence for Impact Investing' (2012), 3
[40] 'Standards of Evidence for Impact Investing', 5
[41] 'Standards of Evidence for Impact Investing', 10
[42] 'Standards of Evidence for Impact Investing', 9
[43] 'Standards of Evidence for Impact Investing', 10
[44] 'Standards of Evidence for Impact Investing', 5
[45] http://resolving-chaos.org/who-we-are
[46] http://resolving-chaos.org/what-we-do

an estimated £71,000 a year", which Resolving Chaos argues it can reduce by £19,000[47]. Unlike Nesta, Resolving Chaos does not have a specific arts-related remit, but its bluntly monetised approach to social problems speaks to shifts in policy discourse that affect all areas in which public subsidy plats a part.

In an email to me on May 1 2015, Duckie fundraiser Emmy Minton, who has been working in fundraising since the turn of the century, offered her perception of these shifts. "The government's policy towards arts funding appears to be to reduce it – and then to tell the arts sector that they need to plug this gap with philanthropy or 'private giving', as some put it. This is a shift towards the model in the US where arts subsidies are rare/non-existent and funding tends to come from wealthy donors or private grants. Problem is there are nothing like enough donors to plug the gap in the UK as there are thousands of arts organisations that have had their arts subsidies reduced or removed entirely so fundraisers (like me) are looking elsewhere for money. The obvious place to go is in health/community/education/social sectors as privatisation/neolibralism is releasing a lot of cash into the open market place."

This is a development that Duckie has engaged with a clear-eyed canniness typical of its shrewd and entrepreneurial approach to available funding opportunities. In the case of the Posh Club, an awareness of such opportunities was evident from the Club's earliest days in Crawley, when a successful application was made to the Lottery-based community fund Awards for All; continued through the successful applications to Awards for All (again) and the Church Urban Fund to underwrite the Hackney pilot scheme in early 2015; and successful subsequent applications to Awards for All, the Church Urban Fund and Healthier Hackney – a fund administered by Health in Hackney, a council organisation that took on local responsibility for

[47] http://resolving-chaos.org/what-we-do/meet-george

public health after nearly 40 years of NHS responsibility – for the second pilot scheme beginning in Novermber 2015. At the time of writing, Minton is also collaborating with experimental psychologists at Queen Mary University of London to pursue a two-part strategy to generate evidence of the Posh Club's measurable efficacy: first by applying to Arts Council England (ACE) for money to fund evidence-based research into the Club's operation; then to conduct such research with the explicit aim of generating evidence to help secure further funding for the Club beyond 2015. [This application was unsuccessful.]

This ACE funding stream, known as the Research Grants Programme 2015-18, represents a departure from the organisation's historic direct underwriting of arts organisations' management and productions. According to the ACE website, the Programme aims to "refresh our thinking on the impact that arts and culture can have on the cultural, social, educational and economic landscape" and to influence "the policy landscape and commissioning activity through robust and credible research"[48]. To Minton, the scheme is "an acknowledgement that this [shift towards the arts sector being obliged to justify itself on the basis of measurable social and economic benefits] is happening and the Arts Council has no power to stop this trend"[49]. It remains to be seen whether that reading is borne out by Conservative-majority government policy but Minton and Duckie have certainly planned their funding strategy around the expectation that it will be. The application she has made to the Research Grants Programme for funding to evaluate the impact of the Posh Club is replete with appeals to economic terms. It reports analysis by Social Finance, an organisation "working with government, social sector and the financial community to find better

[48] http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/apply-for-funding/research-grants-programme-2015-18/
[49] Personal interview, February 5 2015

solutions to society's most difficult problems",[50] that suggests that "effective intervention to reduce isolation among a cohort of 1000 older people could produce returns of over 200 percent (over £1 million)"[51]; the application also asserts that addressing social exclusion in older people could lead to "a reduction in the levels of older people going into crisis and relying on expensive services"[52] and that the Posh Club could demonstrate how "entertainment provides shared experiences through which social connections can be created, reducing isolation, improving health outcomes and reducing the impact on statutory services"[53]. Elsewhere, the application argues that "a new and credible evidence base would have a significant impact – not just for the future development of the TPC [the Posh Club] and Duckie's other audience-specific programmes but on the relationship between the wider arts and health sectors in a climate of reduced public spending"[54]. Research could establish "whether participation in TPC leads to a reduced burden on statutory services – i.e. through participants making fewer GP calls and having more stable long-term health"[55] and thereby serve as "a key tool in arguing for public health commissions [for arts companies] in a context of reduced public spending"[56]. It also suggests that the Posh Club could be franchised around the country with outcomes including "creating jobs, developing skills and leading to a positive grass roots economic impact"[57].

Another potential route to further funding – a route that will be pursued from November – is to test the clinical efficacy of the Club in the context of "social

[50] http://www.socialfinance.org.uk/
[51] Emmy Minton, 'The Posh Club: How entertainment promotes health, wellbeing and engagement through social connection' (application for ACE funding, 2015), 1
[52] 'The Posh Club', 1
[53] 'The Posh Club', 1
[54] 'The Posh Club', 2
[55] 'The Posh Club', 3
[56] 'The Posh Club', 3
[57] 'The Posh Club', 3

prescribing", by which doctors prescribe activities such as exercise, learning or arts engagement to promote a patient's wellbeing, with hoped-for outcomes including reductions in antidepressant prescriptions, demand for counselling and psychological treatment and people making more than one G.P. appointment per month[58]. "Basically what happens is that G.P.s refer depressed patients to us, we track whether they start to feel better over time, and if we can prove that they do then we can claim some money back from public health," Minton reports[59]. "This is significant because not only does it shift the responsibility to us to generate measurable wellbeing, it also makes us take on the financial risk."

In other words, Duckie's current strategy for pursuing subsidy is to argue that being fabulous can, in fact, pay the bills. We don't yet know whether Duckie will succeed in securing ACE funds to research the Posh Club's efficacy at improving its guests' wellbeing and therefore reducing the cost to statutory services; or whether such research would in fact affirm such efficacy; or whether research confirming such efficacy would in fact prove decisive in securing greater funding for Duckie or other arts organisations pursuing similar strategies. However, the strategy has borne fruit insofar as it has yielded several rounds of funding for the Posh Club in both Crawley and Hackney.[60] Indeed, the Posh Club has no direct arts funding at all (though the company's ACE NPO funding does pay Casson's and Eton's salaries); and if its efficacy is proven, it potentially has access to far greater resources than any Duckie project could hope to secure on the basis of artistic value. Perhaps most notable in this context is the £30,000 grant to the Posh Club from the Healthier Hackney fund: a

[58] Friedli et al, *Social prescribing for mental health* (2009), 7 http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/uploads/attachment/339/social-prescribing-for-mental-health.pdf
[59] Personal email, May 1 2015
[60] Meanwhile, in a separate but related approach to be examined in detail elsewhere in my final thesis, the Slaughterhouse Club has secured funding for five years'operation from the Big Lottery Fund and Vauxhall One, a local Business Improvement District organisation

five-figure sum that would until recently have been part of the NHS budget has been allocated to a queer performance company to put on shows to make older people feel better. Consider these strategic funding achievements alongside Minton's and my own research asserting the Posh Club's generation of notable and sustained positive affect among its participants and this looks like success. But what kind of success?

I mentioned earlier the idea that arts organisations faced with funding opportunities predicated on neoliberal policy reforms are damned if they do partake of them and damned if they don't. If they do, they risk complicity with a political agenda that promotes competition and individualism that at the expense of collaboration and empathy. If they don't, they turn their backs on one of the few available sources of backing vital to their survival. (Or so a couple of arguments might run.) In *Performance Affects*, Thompson suggests that applied theatre-makers working in situations of social and political upheaval should always ask themselves "which show are we part of?"[61] In other words, how, and by whom, and to what ends is a company's work being instrumentalised within the larger sociopolitical context of which it inevitably constitutes a part? In this case, does the Posh Club's success subvert or legitimise the neoliberal agenda that facilitates it? So far, it seems to do both: what happens at the Club constitutes a thorough (albeit implicit) rejection of the values of competition and individual self-interest underpinning the marketisation of public services; yet its very ability to function on those terms within such a system could be construed as a validation of that system's amenity to "better solutions" (as Social Finance puts it) of whatever stripe.

Thompson mentions another concept that is useful here: the *perruque*, a gambit that uses the resources, material or otherwise, of the dominant power structure to

[61] *Performance Affects*, 30

effect localised but still potentially worthwhile challenges to its hegemonies. In exploiting a neoliberal structure to deliver empathetic and collectivist experience, the Posh Club could be construed as a *perruque*. But is it a tactical *perruque*, whose effects are limited to generating positive affect within its weekly events but leaves unchallenged the processes of the marketisation of the public sphere? Or is it a strategic *perruque* – a project whose success could present a serious challenge to the whole project of neoliberal marketisation by demonstrating persuasively that public wellbeing is better served by empathy and cooperation than competition and self-interest?[62] The timeliness of the subject makes it impossible to answer the question definitely at this stage but, if the latter were to be an option, the effects of the Club would have to be felt far beyond the church hall of St Paul's, West Hackney.

This is a possibility Minton sees as feasible. She expects her research to show meaningful effects on guests' lives beyond their attendance at the Club on Wednesday afternoons. Beyond that, Duckie "could end up with a nationwide chain of Posh Clubs," she says. "It's a project that's exactly right for its time and the funding climate out there."[63] What would be the implications of such a franchise? Again, it is too soon to say with certainty but they would not be without challenges. Take, for example, the area of labour and financial exchange. So far, the Club has paid its performers (with a set fee per appearance) and producers (through their ACE-funded salaries) but relied on free volunteer labour for the service of food and drink and charged guests a small fee for attendance. The nationwide expansion of this model would institutionalise a high degree of unpaid labour and user payment within the structures of social and health care in ways that might give pause to a company that takes seriously the dignity of paid labour or the principle of healthcare that is free at

[62] These are Michel de Certeau's usages of 'tactical' and 'strategic'
[63] Personal interview, February 5 2015

the point of provision. (This leaves aside Posh Club guests' arguable additional status as indispensible collaborators in a creative project.) Yet, at the same time, if its impact on its guests wellbeing is truly substantial, the social and political impact of a scaled-up Posh Club could be considerable – perhaps considerable enough to persuade significant numbers of people that endeavours rooted in empathy and collaboration are not just good for people but good for the public purse, and thereby contribute to a shift in policy that would promote values closer to those of Duckie than to those of a Conservative government. The fundamental proposition of the Posh Club is that affect has effects: what happens in a room has consequences beyond it. Those are terms on which the Club proposes to have a beneficial impact on its guests' individual lives. The key question to be investigated as it moves forward is whether it can have a comparable impact on the social and political frameworks within which those lives take place.

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