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‘Once Upon a Time, There Was a Tavern’: Metadrag and Other Uses of the Past at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern

Ben Walters

Pubs, bars and nightclubs have been imperfect but vital spaces in post-war Western LGBTQ+ experience, spaces that are not quite public, though they might bring strangers together, and not quite domestic, though they might feel like home. I want to explore how attending to and mythologizing the past of such venues, and particularly their past as sites of fun, can serve queer futurity – the insistence, articulated by José Esteban Muñoz, on imagining a collective future that is richer and more rewarding than oppressively straitened contemporary minoritarian experience (Muñoz, 2009). My focus is the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (or RVT) in south London, UK, and the animation of its specific past through several recent drag performance events produced there. As well as their mobilization of the venue’s specific past, I am interested in these shows’ use of what I want to call *metadrag*. By *metadrag*, I mean drag that recognizably appropriates another drag act’s look, manner or material. Whereas lip-synching drag queens have conventionally imitated mainstream female pop and movie stars, *metadrag* insists that prominent drag acts are no less worthy of reverent reference than, say, Judy Garland, Britney Spears or Beyoncé. Drag queens, like other kinds of star, can generate appropriable iconicity; drag can be the subject of drag. Regina Fong, a celebrated resident performer at the RVT in the 1980s and 1990s, emerges as a particular subject of *metadrag* in the shows I consider here. Through this and other techniques, these performances promoted the felt understanding of the RVT’s lineage of queer use and its persistent enabling of fluid, non-normative forms of identity, temporality and relationality, as well as the roles of drag and fun in supporting this enablement. Ongoing uncertainty around the RVT’s future, and the future of queer nightlife spaces in general in London and other cities around the world, adds urgency to such understanding.

This argument engages interrelated critical contexts including queer futurity, queer understandings of the past, performance studies and the

interdisciplinary study of fun. Queer futurity structures my thinking around the value of future-oriented collective activity. For Muñoz, queerness is utopian in its insistence on hope for a better future and queer futurity itself can be understood as a future-oriented materialist critique of the present (Muñoz, 2009). The past is vital in this context, elucidating both the contingency of present constraints and the utopic potentiality of actual earlier queer experience. Muñoz thus insists on the need 'to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things' (Muñoz, 2009: 27–28). Elizabeth Freeman has articulated various ways in which the past does things queerly in the present. My thinking here is especially indebted to her concept of erotohistoriography, which articulates how embodied and affective experiences of queerness can disrupt normative boundaries between past and present, making the past something that is erotically and emotionally felt and understood through the body as part of current experience rather than intellectually apprehended as part of an alien temporality. This is not to suggest the past can be revived and experienced just as it was but rather to recognize that it has never truly gone away. In Freeman's words: 'Erotohistoriography does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid' (Freeman, 2010: 95).

The past doing things, or doing things with the past, is also a central aspect of drag in particular and queer performance more broadly. Drag has often appropriated to rich effect material from earlier periods. Stephen Farrier (2016), for instance, notes how drag lip-synching can make available aspects of past queer experience, while Fintan Walsh shows how drag performer Panti Bliss's memoir shows serve as 'a kind of animate archive that keeps otherwise marginal and ephemeral experiences alive' (Walsh, 2016: 17). Most critical attention in this respect has been paid to the animation of (auto)biographical material, star personae and artworks such as songs. Less sustained attention has been paid to the potential for drag and queer performance to animate the spatial past. Farrier argues broadly that 'drag performance in specific locations serves to communicate or exchange historical material related to local LGBTQ communities' (2016: 192) but little attention has been paid to how the performative mobilization of the specific past of a specific site can generate kinds of feeling and understanding supportive of queer futurity.

Nor has much attention been paid to the value of mobilizing past queer fun. In queer performance contexts, the animation of the past often carries negative affective associations with suffering and victimhood (Greer, 2012; Farrier, 2015; Walsh, 2016). This resonates with Heather Love's attention to the persistence of feelings 'tied to the experience of social exclusion' such as

shame, loneliness and self-hatred (2009: 4). Feeling backward in this negatively inflected way vitally counterbalances misplaced over-optimism regarding minoritarian freedom and galvanizes necessary further action. Yet, as Freeman recognizes, bodily responses provoked by the queer past can also be 'pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding' (2010: 95). Past queer fun, I suggest, can be usefully attended to and celebrated for its refusal of abjection and its capacity to generate non-normative forms of pleasure, self-expression, relationality and world making. This is not to refute the reality of negative experiences but rather to construct fun as potentially fruitful rather than merely peripheral or compensatory. To take seriously the animation only of negative aspects of the queer past needlessly restricts the arsenal of queer futurity.

The performance events I unpack below do not ignore negative queer experience but they take fun seriously as an engine of queer feeling, thought, action and relationality. They promote erotohistoriographical understandings of the RVT site's persistent identification with queer fun and serve queer futurity through the championing of fun as potentially emancipatory and generative. Fun has received little attention in queer theory or performance studies but more in fields including sociology, computing, education and cultural studies. In the absence of a universally accepted definition, I define fun as stimulating, absorbing and enjoyable activity that is bounded in space and time and perceived by those experiencing or observing it as having low stakes. I understand fun to be performative: individual instances of fun are perceived as having low stakes but they cumulatively rehearse and normalize a wide range of social, ethical and political models. Sociological study of fun has noted its capacity to support collectivity: Ben Fincham frames fun as 'part of the glue that binds together social groups and also informs individuals' identity' (2016: 197). There is, I argue, political consequence to the identification and assertion through fun of enduring collective identity, kinship and agency. Queer fun helps build queer worlds.

In the performances I consider below, fun is enjoyed in itself, valorized as a subject (as well as a mode) of creative expression and revealed as a potent vehicle for feeling and understanding the queer past of a specific site. These performances bear out Muñoz's observation of how 'queer restaging of the past helps us imagine new temporalities that interrupt straight time' (2009: 171), offering concrete if short-lived instances of the aspirational made material. Through these shows, the structural ability of the theatrical stage (noted by Farrier and Greer) to muddle and defy normative, cohesive expectations of space, time, truth and identity meshes queerly with the erotohistoriographical apprehension of a specific site's hybrid past and present to recall, reinscribe and celebrate past pleasures and thrills. With

metadrag as a key technique, these shows render the fun of the RVT's past performative and generative, describing and multiplying the site's facilitation of kinship across time and mortality. Through them, audiences feel past fun in the present and it helps them feel forward with hope.

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern

The Royal Vauxhall Tavern in south London is among the UK's most enduring sites of drag performance, with a continuous and ongoing history of the form predating partial decriminalization of homosexuality in England and Wales in 1967 (Walters, 2015; Avery, 2016). Moreover, it stands on the former site of the Vauxhall pleasure gardens (1661–1859), which had their own lineages of cross-dressing, experimental performance and outlaw sexuality (Borg and Coke, 2011; Walters, 2015; Avery, 2016). The RVT evoked its predecessor through its name, recalling what, by 1859, were called the Royal Gardens Vauxhall, and its fabric, including ornate iron columns, characteristic of the gardens' vernacular architecture, which might once have stood in the gardens themselves (Walters, 2015).

Part of the post-war circuit of London venues catering to homosexual customers and hosting drag performances, the RVT emerged as a pivotal site of the 1960s drag boom and later hosted residencies by prominent acts including Lily Savage, who went on to mainstream UK television success, and Her Imperial Highness Regina Fong, who purported to be the last survivor of the Romanov dynasty and was distinctive for her wedge of red hair and frequent use of participatory 'singalong' numbers (Walters, 2015). During the 1980s, the RVT was a locus of HIV-related community activism and subject to several police raids (Walters, 2015). The actor Cleo Rocos reported visiting in 1988 in the company of singer Freddie Mercury, comedian Kenny Everett and Princess Diana, who wore male drag (Rocos, 2013). Long running residencies include club night Duckie (since 1995), which combines eclectic disco and experimental cabaret, queer and trans community showcase Bar Wotever (since 2005) and Timberlina's bingo show (since 2006). The venue has also hosted regular runs by the D.E. Experience, who deploys metadrag by riffing on Dame Edna Everage's persona, as well as 'post-drag' performers such as David Hoyle and Scottee, resulting in a plurality of audiences and communities invested in the site. This can lead to contention: in 2015, regular performer Charlie Hides dropped a character, Laquisha Jonz, following accusations of blackface. The RVT's emblematic standing has been reinforced by location shooting for the films *Pride* (2014) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (2016) and critical recognition as 'nothing less than the oldest consistently queer venue in the UK' (Avery, 2016: 7).

Duckie produces numerous performance events beyond its Saturday night clubbing residency and has consistently attended to the RVT's past. Duckie host and co-founder Amy Lamé recalled her first encounter with the pub in strongly erotohistoriographical terms: 'It was just like: boom! That instantaneous feeling of, "This is exactly where we need to be" [...] It kind of felt like us carrying on this torch of performance history'; Lamé went on to request her ashes be buried beneath the Tavern's stage (*Save the Tavern*, 2017). An erotic connection to the RVT site combined with intellectual apprehension of its lineage has underpinned numerous Duckie projects, including *Vauxhall Pleasure Promenade* (1999), *Readers Wives Fan Club* (2010), *Vauxhall Bacchanal* (2013), *Happy Birthday RVT* (2014), *Duckie DeCrim 67* (2017) and *Princess* (2020). This appreciation has also been expressed through activism: Duckie members protested abortive plans for the pub's demolition in 1998 and helped form campaign group RVT Future following the venue's sale to property developers in 2014 (Walters, 2015). The RVT Future campaign has strategically articulated the site's queer past. As a campaign member, I wrote a successful application to Historic England to make the RVT the country's first building listed for its significance to LGBTQ+ history (Walters, 2015), affirming Scott Bravmann's (1997) observation of how the narrativization of the queer past can serve activist projects. RVT Future also promoted understanding of the site's past within RVT and LGBTQ+ communities by publishing material online and supporting other expressive forms. These included *Royal Vauxhall* (2016), a cabaret musical about Princess Diana's visit; *Those Were the Days* (2016), a routine by the alternative drag troupe the LipSinkers surveying the site's past; the documentary *Save the Tavern* (Tim Brunsden, 2017); and the comic series *Tales of the Tavern* (Baz Comics, 2017). The venue's fictionalized incarnations included the Imperial Poppycock Saloon, targeted for gentrification in US drag storyteller Dandy Darkly's 'American Apparel', performed at the RVT in 2016, and the Goose Tavern, listed for 'its historical significance to sluts' in the 2017 RVT Christmas pantomime, *Goosed* (Paul Joseph and Tim Benzie, 2017).

I want to unpack four productions mentioned above that restage the RVT's past on the contemporary RVT stage: *Those Were the Days*, *Readers Wives Fan Club*, *Royal Vauxhall* and *Happy Birthday RVT*. They use drag – and particularly metadrag – to facilitate erotohistoriographical understanding, cross-temporal identification, non-normative intergenerational exchange and the championing of fun as a powerful mode of queer kinship and agency. Cumulatively, they yield a kind of animate archive of the RVT itself, a collectivist, activist, celebratory, mythologized autobiography of a queer space. I watched all of these performances live. Quotations and descriptions are taken from notes made at the time and corroborated by video

documentation of *Those Were the Days*, *Readers Wives Fan Club* and *Happy Birthday RVT* and the script for *Royal Vauxhall* provided by the works' respective producers.

Those Were the Days

'Once upon a time there was a tavern ...' Written by Gene Raskin (1962) and famously recorded by Mary Hopkin in 1968, the song 'Those Were the Days' mythologizes a pub where time is strange and different worlds seem attainable through collective enjoyment, dreaming, choice and struggle. In 2016, the LipSinkers, an alternative lip-synching drag troupe resident at the RVT since 2013, added to their repertoire a routine set to Hermes House Band's cheesy 2004 version of Raskin's song that insisted on the site-specific erotohistoriographic power of drag while rejecting conventional narrativization of the past. In their cartoonish, polymorphous, quick-changing style, the LipSinkers embodied RVT performers including Lily Savage, Amy Lamé, David Hoyle, Timberlina and Scottee and, with liberal poetic licence, animated subjects including Princess Diana's visit, police raids, the Laquisha Jonz controversy, the annual RVT Sports Day and Vauxhall pleasure gardens.

Those Were the Days conveyed a huge volume of information about the RVT's lineage of queer use but was nothing like a history lesson. Rather, it was a promiscuous four-minute jumble of dozens of characters across eight intermingled time periods: Victorian sailors rubbing up against Thatcherite cops and twenty-first-century queens, a kaleidoscopic mélange of fun, erotic exchange and DIY creativity. A sense of radical subjective instability played out within the act, with performers frequently and visibly switching personae, and across the act's performance history, with different performers taking different roles on different dates. The LipSinkers constructed fluid identity and temporality as the lifeblood of the RVT; the site's fortifying spatial persistence enabled protean joys.

Those Were the Days illustrated with rare precision the site-specific potential of Freeman's sense of drag as 'a non-narrative history written on the body' (2007: 164) or 'an embodied temporal map, a fleshly warehouse for contingent forms of being and belonging' (Freeman, 2010: 71). The act's copious exploitation of metadrag, meanwhile, constituted a sustained claim for drag and its associated lived experiences of fun, as the wellspring of the Tavern's protean power. As part of this claim, the act placed different forms of RVT drag into conversation: Savage's chip-shop glamour, Lamé's retro-femme transatlanticism and Timberlina's bearded-faerie eco-drag happily jostled together. More capaciously, to watch the cross-temporal ménage of Lamé,



Figure 2.1 Exterior of the Royal Vauxhall Tavern and (right) The LipSinkers as Amy Lamé, Kenny Everett, Princess Diana and Lily Savage in *Those Were the Days*.

Savage, Diana and Kenny Everett gleefully rutting in the pleasure gardens was to experience a coagulant cacophony of history and hearsay, metaphor and metamorphosis, *jouissance* and death. *Those Were the Days* generated erotohistoriographic understandings of the persistent queer use of the RVT site and richly fluid associated forms of identity, temporality and drag itself. Metadrag here yielded a homegrown Olympus of appropriable iconicity.

Readers Wives Fan Club

Where the LipSinkers offered a drag pantheon, *Readers Wives Fan Club* (RWFC) celebrated a specific local hero. Produced by Duckie, directed by Mark Whitelaw and inspired by the eclectic tastes of Duckie's resident DJs the Readers Wives, RWFC was an experimental drag theatre piece themed around fandom. It saw performers Dickie Beau, Jess Love and Rhyannon Styles (then known as Ryan Styles) lip-synching to audiovisual material related to a range of mainstream, subcultural and queer objects of appreciation including the Bay City Rollers, *Paris Is Burning* (1990) and RVT drag culture itself. The production incorporated footage of Regina Fong leading a 1980s Tavern audience in one of her signature routines, a singalong to the theme from *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo* (1966–1970). There was also a top-40 chart of cultural artefacts, including pop acts, TV personalities, alternative nightlife figures and five RVT-related entries: the venue; RWFC itself; Scottee; Regina



Figure 2.2 Regina Fong (left) and Rhyannon Styles (credited as Ryan Styles) as Regina Fong in *Readers Wives Fan Club* (right).

Fong; and 'Ryan Styles as Regina Fong'. This final entry introduced the show's climax, in which Styles-as-Fong recreated the *Skippy* singalong with the present audience.

The valorization of the pursuit of queer and subcultural fun as meaningful and rewarding, both individually and collectively, was central to the show's text and to the experience of audiences, who laughed, cheered and engaged intently. More specifically, by including the material mentioned above, *RWFC* boldly asserted the comparable value of the RVT and its associated culture to, say, pop or punk. This claim was reinforced through the show's distinctive use of metadrag to animate the past through Styles's appearance as Fong. Styles's stylized costume appropriated and adapted Fong's iconic silhouette and hair according to Duckie's twenty-first-century aesthetic, at once observing a site-specific lineage, asserting its value, reworking it on new terms and inviting the present audience to feel with and through a past audience.

The climactic *Skippy* singalong attested to the 'virtual/not-virtual' terms posited by Farrier (2013) as audiences were simultaneously not-virtual viewers of *RWFC* in 2010 and virtual viewers of Fong's show in the 1980s. The erotohistoriographical charge, primed by the footage screened earlier, was great, generating a site-specific cross-temporal frisson radiating out from Styles's body to recast the whole venue. When Styles dragged up as Fong, the 2010 RVT stage dragged up as the 1980s stage and the 2010 audience dragged up as their 1980s forebears. RVT veterans were dragged back to their lived experience of Fong's actual shows while newcomers learned bodily about the venue's pedigree as a site of non-normative identity, relationality and cultural production. Farrier also notes drag's claim to the past through the performer's body; here, that claim was made through the performer's body, the audiences' bodies and the building in which they all stood. Collective participation fostered a sense of site-specific identity across generations rooted in shared

experience and understanding not of queer victimhood but the quotidian and fortifying nature of queer fun. Metadrag here mobilized Fong as an aesthetic icon and a catalyst for transtemporal kinship.

Royal Vauxhall

If RWFC staged the RVT as a site of galvanizing collectivity, *Royal Vauxhall* figured it as a site of generative derangement. *Royal Vauxhall* was a three-hander musical about Princess Diana's reported visit to the RVT in male drag accompanied by Freddie Mercury and Kenny Everett. Written by cabaret performer Desmond O'Connor, it had several runs featuring various casts at the RVT between 2015 and 2017 and at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2016. In *Royal Vauxhall*, the persistence of the RVT as a site of queer expression provided an arena for the exploration of fluid identities and temporalities. Within the narrative, the venue was successively idealized as a site of escapist relief from normative pressures (Diana's marriage, Kenny's closeted persona, Freddy's anxieties around HIV), lauded for its historic value to a cornucopia of queer subjectivities, framed as a dangerously carnivalesque site of both liberation and peril and revealed as capable of catalysing radical subjective refashioning, most prominently Diana's transformation from demure passivity to determined agency.

The show foregrounded the persistence and fame of the RVT as a queer site through a celebratory song dedicated to its 'always fun and never boring' past, drawing on documented aspects of its use as well as canards such as its supposed time as a music hall. Such material disseminated Tavern lore diegetically to Diana and non-diegetically to the show's audiences, prioritizing a lineage of fun structured around non-normative sexual and gender expression over strictly verifiable historicity. The production also took liberties with its characters' biographies and perhaps its very premise; I know some RVT regulars who, Rocos's first-person account notwithstanding, consider Diana's visit to be apocryphal. *Royal Vauxhall*, then, asserted the practice of telling stories about the RVT as part of the culture of the RVT, and poetic licence as a potent aspect of that practice. Rather than dubious or deceptive, I find this defiantly emancipatory. The queer past is fragile and ephemeral, its material traces often rendered invisible by the caution that precludes their creation, the indifference that precludes their preservation and the erasure that precludes their valorization. Sidestepping literally bound evidencing, poetic licence can assert the real emotional, affective, social, cultural and political power of a given site to act as an engine of queer identity, relationality and agency.

This power is redoubled through the direct exploitation of an audience's access to a given site's erotohistoriographical material charge. At one point, as in *Readers Wives Fan Club*, the figure of Regina Fong was embodied through metadrag to serve as a fulcrum for a hybrid temporality, hosting a show-within-the-show on the very stage used by Fong herself. This wasn't the only scene in which the contemporary RVT and its audience were called upon to 'play' earlier versions of themselves: *Royal Vauxhall* repeatedly dragged the whole site and its occupants back to the 1980s as performers marauded around the space, engaged people at the bar and cajoled some on stage. 'It happened in this room,' insisted a prologue that addressed audience members as both present-day viewers and 1980s punters, juxtaposing period and contemporary references in a way that didn't compromise credibility so much as reinforce the idea of a space resistant or indifferent to normative temporality.

Drag itself was also unstable or polyvalent in *Royal Vauxhall*. Introduced as a functional way for Diana to go unrecognized, it became a source of pleasure ('I feel good!') and vehicle for self-determination, butchly enabling assertive confidence. Later, drag came to figure a more radical destabilization of identity that resonated with the production's form: each performer assumed multiple roles and many of the characters themselves masked, lost or reshaped themselves through drag and disguise in sometimes discombobulating ways. It remained unclear, for instance, whether the Fong character was Fong herself or Freddie dressed as Fong, and the tone of her show-within-the-show was more mischievous and disruptive than the celebratory exuberance of *RWFC*, probing characters' inconsistencies, arbitrarily shifting terms of engagement and opening up space for transformations. The contingency and fluidity of identity became a narrative leitmotif that chimed with the production's temporal instability. In *Royal Vauxhall*, the RVT as a location and drag as a mode yielded a queer site in which time and identity came unmoored. Metadrag here mobilized Fong as a kind of emblematic trickster figure, a mythic representation of drag's capacity to muddle, unmake and remake self.

Happy Birthday RVT

For *Royal Vauxhall*'s Diana, the RVT and Regina Fong were vehicles for carnivalesque intervention into a life lived elsewhere. But they can also represent a life world powerfully distinct to itself. *Happy Birthday RVT* (2014) showcased short turns created during an eight-day summer school for nine young performers that was overseen by director Mark Whitelaw and formed

part of Duckie's wider *Happy Birthday RVT* project. Participants drew on other aspects of this project, including archival material and interviews with RVT veterans included in *Save the Tavern*. Technologies of intergenerational transmission therefore underpinned the creation of their acts, which animated aspects of the RVT's past including clandestine post-war socializing, changing drag styles, police raids, AIDS activism and contemporary political ambivalence. Yet the acts resisted normative structures of heredity, such as conventional narratives, reminiscence or naturalistic reenactment, instead using drag and burlesque vocabularies, stylized personae and self-reflexive audience engagement. The showcase sidestepped models of heredity predicated on older people as bearers of the historic past and younger people as emblems of hopeful futurity to insist on a hybrid temporality beyond generational conflict or continuity, producing an erotohistoriographic charge: Leggy, for instance, used a dress worn by an RVT drag performer in the 1980s while Vijay Patel invited audience members of all vintages to inscribe RVT-related memories onto bricks. Other performers presented characters who seriously and rewardingly pursued fun, including Jade Pollard-Crowe's police officer, Quinn Tuesday's party girl and Scarlett Lassoff's Queen Victoria.

A great deal of information about the RVT's past was communicated that night. So was an understanding of such information not as mere fact but as the substrate of an ongoing dynamic and conversational collectivity. One act expressed this emergent quality with particular potency. This video-interactive lip-synch piece, by Alethea Raban and Ellis D, referred to Vauxhall's distinctive sewer system and positioned queer relationality at the RVT as a kind of glorious virulence, transmissible across space, time and mortality. Raban and D remixed interview material gathered by Tim Brunsden to craft a sophisticated intertemporal nexus through whose form and text queer kinship made light of death. On an audio track, Bette Bourne, who first visited the RVT in the 1950s and later co-founded drag theatre troupe Blooplips, recalled a eulogy delivered by one resident RVT drag queen, Lily Savage, at the wake of another, Regina Fong. Savage willfully ignored, denied or overcame the fact of Fong's demise by directly appealing to her corpse to confirm Savage's anecdotes. According to Bourne, 'Lily kept saying, "Didn't it?", "Wasn't it?", "It was like that, wasn't it?", talking to the body.' By lip-synching to these words, the young performers opened up a queer colloquy, rooted in a specific site yet radically unbounded, a confluence of dissident experience, understanding, imagination, conversation and technology that knitted together Fong, Savage, Bourne, Brunsden, Raban and D, the audience of *Happy Birthday RVT*, later online viewers of the video of the performance, myself and, now, you. To insist on talking to the dead can be a way of insisting on talking to those not yet here; to assert collective

continuity and the capacity of the queer past to undergird the hopes and expectations of queer futurity. Metadrag here mobilized Fong as the presiding spirit of a wry and resilient life world that exceeded time, space and mortality.

Feeling forward

In different but connected ways, these performance events served utopic ideas of queer futurity by generating, disseminating and reinforcing knowledge of continuous queer use of the RVT site by and to multiple audiences through non-normative modes. They affirmed commonality and kinship between users of the site at different periods, and asserted the site's persistent support of fluid and hybrid conceptions of identity, relationality and temporality. They deployed drag as a powerful technology for the expression of such non-normative conceptions, placed different modes of drag into conversation with one another and, through metadrag, valorized drag culture itself.

Unusually for performance events engaged with the queer past, these shows foregrounded past fun and prioritized fun for present audiences. They showed how queer fun can function to refuse abjection and generate non-normative forms of pleasure, self-expression, creativity and relationality. Not that they ignored bad feeling: each show attended to melancholy, anxiety, self-loathing or violence, framing their drag-fuelled fun as contingent, fragile, resilient and ingenious. This fun was also exclusionary, at least by omission: these productions predominantly centred the non-disabled cisgender gay white men to whom the RVT itself has predominantly historically catered. Metadrag can also support the expression of more marginalized subjectivities in related contexts: during Duckie's *Gay Shame* event on 6 July 2019, for instance, in a railway arch adjacent to the RVT, one trans performer of colour, Travis Alabanza, reanimated to compelling effect a lip-synch act by another trans performer of colour, the late Zsarday, set to Tom Eyen and Henry Krieger's 1982 song 'And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going' (Revell, 2019). Rather than foregrounding fun or poetic licence, Alabanza precisely recreated Zsarday's angular choreography and imploring affect, their body rendered conduit, archive and tribute to a rare forebear. Here, metadrag enabled a devastatingly sincere mode expressive of an ongoing lineage of intolerable burden placed upon trans bodies of colour within and beyond LGBTQ+ scenes.

Feeling backward, in recognition of lingering negative experiences and affects, is vital to mitigating over-optimism about current and future prospects for queer lives. Yet feeling forward is a vital aspect of queer futurity, with its insistence on hope for a better world. To feel forward declares an investment in the future and is hopeful for that reason in itself, even if the

feelings involved are sometimes more ominous than auspicious. To promote celebratory awareness of the value of the RVT site's past is, given continued uncertainty about the venue's long-term prospects, to raise both the galvanizing spectre of its erasure (evoked in the documentary title *Save the Tavern*) and the utopic glimmer of greater power to come (evoked in the campaign name RVT Future). Insisting on such awareness, the drag performance events unpacked above invite colloquy between regulars and newcomers, performers and punters, living and dead. At the end of *Readers Wives Fan Club*, Styles-as-Fong rallied the crowd ahead of her singalong, asking: "Are you with me, RVT?" To answer yes was to be with many, to join a mythic queer host, to find the past in the present and use it to feel fiercely forward. Those were the days, and are, and shall be.

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