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WELCOME TO THE POSH CLUB

How high status and low stakes can help build
better worlds for marginalised people

Ben Walters

Introduction

Late one morning in January 2015, St Paul's church hall in Hackney, east London, began to fill up.¹ Soon, it bustled with around 80 mostly local working-class people aged 60 or older, mostly dressed as if for a wedding or celebration. Attentive volunteer waiters seated them at tables and plied them with drinks, sandwiches, cake stands and compliments. Then a compère took to the small stage and introduced a flapper dance troupe, a soul singer and a comic burlesque duo. Finally, a DJ played upbeat tunes and many guests danced. This was Hackney's first taste of The Posh Club (2012–), and it was a hit.

This chapter describes and analyses The Posh Club – an afternoon cabaret event produced by the queer performance collective Duckie for older working-class people at risk of isolation – and argues that it materialises a better world for its marginalised participants. The chapter outlines Duckie's company history and the origins, operation and growth of The Posh Club, locating it in relation to the structural marginalisation of older people, austerity policy in the United Kingdom and dominant understandings of applied performance work. Rooted in participant observation, it argues that the club at once endows guests with high status and cultivates a low-stakes environment, supporting new kinds of confidence, understanding and relationality and enabling fun and fabulous experiments in dressing up, dancing and performance. These cumulatively materialise an expansive and expanding better world for the club's marginalised participants, notwithstanding certain structural and logistical challenges.

The Posh Club emerged from the practice of an experimental queer

nightlife performance collective. Duckie began in 1995 as a Saturday-night party for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and otherwise queer (LGBTQ+) people, though in practice most of its regulars have been cis gay men.² Its focus on boozy fun, offbeat rock music and experimental short-form performance appealed to some who experienced London's 1990s gay scene as increasingly homogenous and commercialised. Alongside Saturday nights, Duckie's practice evolved to encompass large-scale immersive performance club nights, extended theatrical runs at major cultural institutions and, more recently, a range of community-based projects engaged with normatively marginalised populations. As well as The Posh Club, examples of these projects include the Duckie Homosexualist Summer School (2015–2016) and Duckie QTIBPOC Creatives (2018–), offering training and guidance to aspiring young queer performers, and The Slaughterhouse Club (2014–), a drop-in arts project based in south London homeless hostels. Like Duckie's original Saturday nights, these disparate projects can be understood as 'homemade mutant hope machines' in that they emerge from lived experience, operate relatively autonomously, adapt to changing conditions and routinely generate hope in the possibility of better worlds for marginalised people. The Posh Club's emergence and practice offer a generative case study of this approach in relation to the contexts of applied theatre practice, ageing and social care.

The Posh Club: history and contexts

Like all of Duckie's work, The Posh Club emerged from lived experience – in this case, the experience of Duckie co-founder Simon Casson's mother Irene, who moved to Crawley, a town south of London, in 2012, aged 84 (Casson and Eton, 2015). Without many friends, she was lonely there, so Casson and his sister threw a 'posh' tea party for Irene and a couple of friends, the success of which spurred further events that eventually mutated into the format described above. At the time of writing (June 2019), Posh Clubs have been held in Hackney, Elephant & Castle and Clerkenwell in London and also in Crawley, Brighton, Hastings and Peterborough, with thousands of guests attending hundreds of events (Eton and Minton, 2019). The club's operation was supported by Duckie's organisational expertise in event production and fundraising (from sources including Arts Council England, Big Lottery Fund, local authorities, charities and local businesses) as well as extensive volunteer labour (Walters, 2020). For each site, Duckie has carried out a 'needs analysis' (Duckie's term), using local authority and

other data to identify groups likely to benefit from the club (such as minority ethnic people, LGBTQ+ people and people living with dementia, disability or housing challenges). Organisers would then develop a 'community partner network' (including, for example, housing organisations, lunch clubs, health services, charities, faith groups and hospices) and contact individual potential guests up to six months in advance of club events (Minton, 2019). Advertising flyers and posters were used at sites including doctor surgeries and bus stops, and some guests learned of the club through local, regional, national and international media coverage or word of mouth (Minton, 2019). Guests ranged in age from 60 to 110 and producers estimated around 80 per cent lived independently; around 20 per cent were accompanied by carers (including guests' spouses, partners, children or friends as well as nurses, personal assistants and hospice and housing workers) (Minton, 2019). Most guests made their own way to the club, with or without carers, though Duckie also provided taxis for less than one per cent of guests in exceptional instances and during a limited trial of one-to-one support for people with advanced dementia (Minton, 2019).

The analysis that follows is based on my attendance as a participant-observer throughout two 10-week runs of The Posh Club in Hackney between January and March 2015 and in Crawley between October and December 2016, as well as interviews conducted around these runs and access to Duckie's internal documentation. Available data suggest that guests' experience of The Posh Club has been very positive. The large majority of events to date have run near, at or over capacity. Duckie's participant surveys and my own interviews yielded almost unanimously positive responses from guests, who frequently reported improvements to their perceived health, wellbeing and happiness; this accorded with my own overwhelmingly positive affective experience of the club (Duckie, 2015a; 2015b). It was a happy, hopeful, empathetic and dynamic space.

The Posh Club can be helpfully contextualised in relation to applied performance practices, contemporary austerity policy in the United Kingdom and the framing of older working-class people at risk of isolation as a potentially marginalised or 'queer' population.

The Posh Club aligns with prevalent understandings of applied performance in some ways and diverges from them in others. The Posh Club can be seen to 'collaborate artistically and socially with a particular (often socially marginalised) group' with 'socially meaningful' intent, to quote Jen Harvie (2013: 20). Many applied projects textually

foreground the lived experience of such groups related to their vulnerability. However, while a minority of acts staged at the club explicitly evoke experiences related to ageing, its guests are more typically engaged as subjective agents through the inherently participatory forms of cabaret and through emergent opportunities to mobilise expressive agency as social dancers, distinctive dressers and on-stage performers. The Posh Club resists the essentialising tendencies around marginalisation that Caoimhe McAvinchey (2014: 6) describes as habitual to applied theatre, and avoids the common expectation, identified by Helen Nicholson (2004) and Philip Taylor (2013), that participants dramatically narrativise their lives with cathartic or politically interventionist intent. Rather, the club offers a practical example of the potential, identified by James Thompson, for applied practices to generate affectively powerful relational encounters that can constitute 'a purposeful part of an intervention into our sensible world' or the collective forging of a small new one (2009: 177).

This approach is noteworthy in the context of the austerity programme driving UK economic and social policy since 2010, characterised by radical reductions in state funding for structures of support for vulnerable populations, including older people at risk of isolation (Harvie, 2013: 15). 'They've got rid of all the social clubs', as one guest told me. In producing the club, Duckie draws on its collective expertise as a critically engaged 'artrepreneur', to use Harvie's term, resiliently, nimbly navigating neoliberal conditions without fetishising neoliberal values such as individualism and profit (2013: 24). So while some funding was secured by arguing that the club 'reduces the burden on statutory services' from isolated older people, the club itself is uninterested in methodologies that privilege competition or targets as meaningful indicators of success (Duckie, 2017).³

Rather than treating guests as economic data points, The Posh Club treats them as queer; not in the sense of avowing a non-normative identity related to sexuality or gender but in the wider sense of identifying lonely older people as a population often 'framed as being already lost or forfeited', in Judith Butler's phrasing, and suffering related social, cultural and health disadvantages (2011: 383). Even within The Posh Club, some organisers and volunteers admitted to 'unconscious prejudice' around older people's capacity to dance, enjoy themselves or engage with performance culture (Posh Club Hackney organiser, 2015). Framing The Posh Club as a queer undertaking foregrounds its emphases on taking seriously the affective and

relational needs of marginalised people and supporting not only their comfort but their subjective expression and agency. One guest distinguished the project from other available events: 'If I was going to Age UK, I would feel like I was being treated as an "old" person, they call you "clients" there. But The Posh Club is a very different thing' (Duckie, 2015d: 3). By supporting the kind of queer bonds that, in Joshua J. Weiner and Damon Young's words, emerge 'not in spite of but *because* of some force of negation', the club enabled new ways of being (2011: 236).

High status, low stakes

Integral to this approach was The Posh Club's construction of its guests as 'posh', or high status, through various methods that drew comparison from participants with the Café Royal or Café de Paris (Posh Club Hackney mother and daughter guests, 2015; Posh Club Hackney church volunteer, 2015). Duckie selected sites for the club in areas with low social provision where the invitation to 'dress posh' and the vision of a volunteer in bow tie and waistcoat at the door conjured a novel aspirational affect; the collective also secured press coverage centring dressed-up guests and references to the Ritz and champagne, while promotional flyers featured imagery of cake stands, cocktails and pearls (*Crawley and Horley Observer*, 2016). Detailed attention to elegant décor, table settings and service impressed upon guests, in one organiser's words, that 'you care about me and I matter enough for this to be right' (Posh Club Hackney organiser, 2015). High status was affirmed through respectful pampering, ranging from organisation of transport and accommodation of practical requirements to lavish compliments. Many guests also participated in photography projects celebrating guests' glamorous outfits and pleasurable experiences at the club.

Many guests had great fun at The Posh Club. This was no mere side effect. As in other Duckie projects, fun operated as a hugely generative social technology supportive of new kinds of confidence, understanding and collaboration among and between guests, performers, organisers, volunteers and others. The normative trivialisation of fun as categorically inconsequential occludes its considerable capacity to provide sites of agency supportive of subjective, relational and civic experimentation.⁴ Indeed, the very association of fun with low stakes (if something is fun, it can't really matter; if something matters, it can't be fun) helps people give

themselves permission to try new things in environments framed as fun. The Posh Club's habitual characteristics of animated conversation, joyous dancing and rapt spectatorship constituted such an environment, with production elements consciously evoking aspects of popular fun from some guests' younger days, such as posters styled after music-hall bills and acts paying tribute to Elvis.

In some criticism of socially turned performance, fun – or, more broadly, affectively harmonious sociality – is understood both to preclude aesthetic challenge and to displace 'a politics of social justice' (Bishop, 2012: 25–26). The Posh Club belied both these claims by mobilising the technological and performative capacities of fun, cultivating these over many weeks as part of a sustained project imbricated into participants' lives over weeks and months rather than located only in the context of a one-off event at an arts venue. An overall environment of pleasurable low-stakes experimentation enabled the club to showcase to enthusiastic reception a variety of potentially challenging works outside guests' habitual aesthetic experience, such as an experimental naked dance act performed by Jordan Lennie and choreographed by Joseph Mercier. Off-stage activity was no less important. The Posh Club's convivial atmosphere catalysed rich and enduring relational networks that qualify as a project of 'social justice' (in Bishop's phrase). Such networks generatively encompassed relations between performers, organisers, volunteers and guests, including encounters across differences related to age, class, race, neurodivergence, sexuality and gender identity; relations between users of the club and users of other church or community-centre services; practically supportive friendships that continued outside the club; links between club participants and participants in structures of local authority, health and social care, charities and funding bodies; and, through media coverage, local, national and international publics. Through each network, The Posh Club enacted the potential for people to act empathetically and collectively to address wants and needs arising from their lived experiences, constituting a project of social justice in the context of austerity.

Fabulous experiments in dressing up, dancing and performing

The Posh Club also enabled subjective self-expression and agency in powerful, sometimes unplanned ways, particularly through dressing up, dancing and performance. In accepting the invitation to 'dress posh',

many guests embodied what madison moore has identified as the power of sartorial 'fabulousness' to enact 'a form of creativity from the margins' for 'undervalued' subjects (2018: 4, 21, 8). Guests who showed off their signature looks – from a sequined beret-and-shift ensemble to lapels heaving with enamelled Americana – expressed a distinctive sensibility and projected images of difference by participating in proliferating photography projects and media coverage. Dressing posh was a mode of self-expression, a marker of high status and a form of labour supporting hopeful collectivity: guests' fashion contributed to the aesthetic and affective construction of The Posh Club as fun and fabulous.

In their embrace of the dancefloor, meanwhile, many guests embodied what Fiona Buckland identifies as the value of social dancing to queer world-making through its support of 'self-knowledge, self-preservation, sociality, and self-transformation', its location of pleasure in relational exchange and its broad availability to most participants in a given event (2002: 66–67). Volunteers often danced with each other and guests, forging social bonds and occasionally forming kick-lines or delivering group numbers. As well as being a source of pleasure, dancing at The Posh Club catalysed new kinds of public agency, from good-natured stage invasions to the formation of Tap Cats and Posh Club Dance Club, initiatives in which guests worked with Duckie choreographers to create routines performed at the club, other Duckie events and as standalone events. On 17 June 2019, Posh Club Dance Club performed at Sadler's Wells, one of the UK's preeminent dance performance venues.

The 'Posh Club Spot', meanwhile, emerged as a slot within the cabaret format in which guests could sing, dance or tell jokes as part of an event's mixed bill. Of the various acts I saw, some landed better than others, but all were distinctively expressive and respectfully received. At one event, a guest recited a poem he had just written on a paper napkin, an ode to the club pastiching the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, referring to participants as 'a host of friendly humans/Sitting on chairs, forgetting their fears, sharing their cares'. In this moment, author, audience, process and subject were one. Here was an expression of the club by the club for the club; a group habitually denied a voice describing itself to itself for itself. The reception was rapturous. Such collectivity was also expressed through improvised participatory forms, sometimes to deeply moving effect. Trumpeter Tim Bolwell's instrumental rendition of 'Can't Help Falling in

Love', for instance, spurred an impromptu singalong in which the on-stage turn subtly mutated into support for the mass of performers seated throughout the space.

Conclusion

The Posh Club was not without structural or logistical challenges. Attendance at the club did not always reflect local demographics, leading to separate initiatives in Hackney and Crawley to engage more Turkish and South Asian guests, respectively; oversubscription also led organisers to develop more flexible and efficient booking and seating strategies (Eton and Minton, 2019). Overall, however, the club's achievements to date have been notable, providing not only a space of entertainment and relief, or a structure for reducing annual social and health care budgets, but a stage on which an otherwise largely stageless group can explore its own subjectivity and collectivity. At The Posh Club, people did things that brought them joy and were supported and celebrated in doing so. 'It's the highlight of our life', said one guest; 'for one day a week, people are alive and happy', said another; to a third, it's 'brilliant, beautiful, a different world' (Duckie, 2016).

This world was more experimental and fluid: people were supported and celebrated in connecting across difference, expressing distinctive sensibilities and moving contingently between the roles of guest, performer and volunteer, resisting fixed economic or social categorisation. Against the backdrop of neoliberal austerity, The Posh Club sustainably generated hope in the possibility of better worlds. Indeed, it materialised one. On the dancefloor, an 85-year-old woman with a bad shoulder who rarely leaves the house is starting a conga line, following a pleasurable impulse, finding like-minded collaborators, moving with them in new directions.

Coda (2020)

The Posh Club was unable to continue in the form described in this chapter during the coronavirus pandemic so Duckie producers developed a range of new holding forms apt to changed conditions. These included physically distanced small-scale performances on guests' doorsteps and in care homes' outdoor spaces, messages and gifts sent by post, a series of original 'PC TV' online broadcasts and a series of Posh Club newspapers. Updated information can be found at <https://theposhclub.co.uk/projects/>.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise attributed, material details and participant quotations are from the author's own observation.
- 2 For more on Duckie's origins and development, see Ben Walters (2020), *Dr Duckie: Homemade Mutant Hope Machines – The PhD*, London: Duckie. Available online at <http://www.duckie.co.uk/dr-duckie/read-the-phd>.
- 3 For more on Duckie's navigation of neoliberal conditions, see Ben Walters (2021, forthcoming), ' "Our strength comes from our connection to each other": a conversation about resilience with Duckie employees Simon Casson, Dicky Eton and Emmy Minton' in *Research in Drama Education*.
- 4 For more on the technological and performative capacities of fun, see Walters (2020).

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