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'creative work' in the theatrical representation of  
prostitution**

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# Putting on the Red Boots: Role-play as 'coping work' and 'creative work' in the theatrical representation of prostitution

## Abstract

This article examines the representation of various forms of prostitution in a range of contemporary theatre pieces, from the traumatised victims of sex-trafficking in Cora Bissett's and Stef Smith's *RoadKill* (Traverse, Edinburgh 2010; Theatre Royal, Stratford East 2011), to more diverse depictions of sex workers in Alecky Blythe's verbatim piece *The Girlfriend Experience* (Royal Court 2008; Young Vic 2009) and the group devised *Sex Workers' Opera* (Courtyard Theatre 2014; Arcola 2015; Pleasance, Islington 2016). Particular attention is paid to examining each piece's claims towards 'authenticity' of representation. Alongside this, instances of metatheatricality and role-playing within the role within each of these works are considered, highlighting the adoption of performance practices by real-life and fictionalised prostitutes. Drawing on Kirsten Pullen's (2005) study of the overlap between actresses and 'whores', which suggests performance as a strategy that lends agency to sex workers, on Bertolt Brecht's model of *gestic* acting, and on Dorothy Heathcote's (1991) definitions of the twin aims of role-play as 'coping work' and 'creative work', this article examines the potential for each within the performative acts of prostitutes.

## Keywords

prostitution; sex work; performance; role-play; *geste*; authenticity

## Article

One of the most striking scenes in Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1941) is the moment when mute, overlooked Katrin puts on Yvette's red boots and hat and attempts to adopt the attitude of the 'whore' (Brecht 1962, 25-7). When Mother Courage sees Katrin aping Yvette, she reprimands her:

What on earth are you up to - with a whore's hat! Take it off this minute! Are you mad? With the enemy coming? (*She tears the hat off her head.*) Do you want them to find you and make a whore of you? And she has the boots on too, straight from Babylon. (Brecht 1962, 27)

As Katrin cannot answer her mother's questions, we do not know whether she *does* want the enemy to 'make a whore of' her. However, denied as she is any expression of her own sexuality, Katrin eventually suffers a far worse fate than Yvette. Shot down from a roof, whilst trying to warn a town of an impending attack because she cannot bear to hear of the children that will die there, Katrin's act is presented as one of goodness, but also one of desperation, spurred by her own lack of access to womanhood, either through sexuality or

maternity. This fate prompts us to read Katrin's transgressive moment with Yvette's boots more positively than her mother does, particularly within the context of Brecht's largely uncritical representation of prostitution.<sup>1</sup> In order to do this, it helps to consider Katrin's act as an example of Brecht's concept of *geste* or *gestus*, a complex mode of performance combining 'gesture and gist, attitude and point: one aspect of the relationship between two people, studied singly, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed' (Willett 1967, 173). Frederick Ewen calls this 'a kind of "quotation" - marking out clearly the particular social relationship of the character at a particular time toward another person' (Ewan 1967, 228). Thus, in this instance, Katrin is self-consciously 'quoting' Yvette's walk; adopting the stance and the attire of the 'whore' to momentarily embody a sexual identity she is otherwise denied. If we consider *geste* as role-playing within the role, and see Katrin not as becoming, but as *playing*, the whore, we might read her act as a positive attempt to explore alternative, and potentially liberating, possibilities to her own restrictive existence.

In her study on *Actresses and Whores*, Kirsten Pullen posits a similar notion that 'the whore position may allow women a space for agency' and that furthermore, 'performance is the strategy by which they expand that position to offer alternative narratives of female sexuality and experience' (Pullen 2005, 2). To reach these conclusions, Pullen does not ignore the broad range of - often conflicting - feminist responses to prostitution and sex work. Her work carefully acknowledges the radical feminist position, associated with writers such as Kathleen Barry, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, which posits a link between 'prostitution, pornography and violence' and consequently argues for their abolition.<sup>2</sup> However, Pullen also highlights that, whilst some women advocating for these causes, such as the organisation WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt), have had first-hand experience of the sex industry, many more are academics, writers and campaigners who seek to act on behalf of prostitutes, claiming to have their best interests in

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<sup>1</sup> Brecht's attitude towards prostitution is far removed from Courage's shock and horror, and is instead in keeping with his general insight into, and de-romanticising of, financial transactions, and with his sympathy for the choices made by those most often disadvantaged by them. In this light, prostitution, in Brecht's work, becomes a sometimes murky, sometimes rewarding business, no better or worse than anyone else's. To underline this point, Mother Courage talks of how love makes you a man's 'slave for life' (23). She highlights the economic relationships that govern all male/female relations whether directly (through prostitution) or indirectly (through more respectable institutions such as marriage). However, she still maintains an air of disapproval towards Yvette's lifestyle, drawing attention to her drinking in the morning and suggesting she has an 'illness' (21). Yvette is described rather more kindly by Brecht's stage directions as '*a very good looking young person*' (20). Conversation does not obviously label her a prostitute; but the role is signified through *geste* - her 'swaying gait' (23), red boots and hat, which is recognised as a 'whore's hat' (27). Rather than a stereotypical 'streetwalker', Yvette is a mistress for hire, attaching herself to rich old men, one of whom eventually dies and leaves her wealthy. Through this trajectory we can see that Yvette is really playing the same game as Mother Courage, she is just playing it better, and more honestly. Although she initially presents herself as a victim of circumstance and jilted love, she soon rallies when opportunity knocks and shows herself to be in control of situations and people. For example, when she negotiates for Mother Courage to purchase her wagon, she is firmly in control of the situation, but role-plays the innocent woman in need of guidance from her lover, in order to please him and ensure a good result (35-40). Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* has a similarly frank and non-judgemental quality to its depiction of a group of characters named collectively as 'the whores', but individually as Jenny, Dolly, Coaxer, Betty and Nelly.

<sup>2</sup> This perspective sees pornography and prostitution as wholly abusive practices, not only in and of themselves, but as part of a spectrum of sexual violence that oppresses all women, as well as prostitutes themselves (Pullen 2005 149).

mind.<sup>3</sup> One of Pullen's key concerns is that '[h]istorically as well as in the contemporary moment, the whore has been silenced or ignored' (2). This accusation is levelled not just at male, patriarchal voices, but at feminists who 'ignore the voices and lived experiences of prostitutes' (148), and 'deny the validity of alternative accounts of prostitution by labelling them "false consciousness"' (152). Consequently, Pullen aligns herself more closely with the more contemporary, pro-sex, or sex-positive, feminist position, which argues that prostitution can not only provide financial independence for women, but also 'potentially liberatory outlets for sexual expression and experimentation' (151); and that the radical feminist condemnation of such work will only 'replicate the whore stigma, reducing prostitutes to victims' (148). Whilst Pullen is not overtly dismissive or condemnatory towards the radical feminist position, she demonstrates that pro-sex feminist organisations are more likely to 'encompass multiple perspectives' and allow 'more opportunity for prostitutes to represent their own experiences' than their radical feminist counterparts (152).<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is largely from this well-justified, but still controversial and contested, pro-sex perspective that Pullen argues that 'theatrical metaphors offer agency to sex workers' (135), and:

Performance is a strategy that allows working prostitutes to take up the whore position and offer alternative narratives of female sexuality and experience. 'Status as actresses' offers sex workers a position outside of conventional discourses of the prostitute as victim or slut. (135)

The understanding that performative acts can enable their participants to increase their sense of agency and imagine alternative narratives is most frequently encountered within Applied Theatre studies. Within practices such as Forum Theatre (Boal 2008), as well as in the training of many professions, including doctors, psychiatrists, counsellors and the police (Tolan and Lendrum 2002; Van Ments 1999), theatrical role-play is well-established as an empowering, enlightening and effective device. This type of role-taking (similarly to Katrin's) allows participants to imagine new possibilities and test new strategies, playing around the boundaries of their identity and experimenting with self in a safe, controlled environment. Role-play is also central to the work of veteran drama in education practitioner Dorothy Heathcote, who writes:

Educational Drama can be defined as having two significant aspects and aims. One of these we can define as 'creative work', the other as 'coping work'. Both are significant areas of experience in the developing person. A broad definition of educational drama is 'role-taking', either to understand a social situation more thoroughly or to experience imaginatively via identification in social situations. (Heathcote 1991, 49)

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<sup>3</sup> We see these attitudes reflected in several contemporary plays that represent prostitution, such as Cora Bissett's and Stef Smith's *RoadKill*, discussed below.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, she cites anthological writings such as Priscilla Alexander's and Frederique Delacoste's *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (1998) and Wendy Chapkis's *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labour* (1997), amongst others, as valuable forums for sex workers wishing to represent themselves on their own terms and in their own voices (148). In theatrical terms, similar objectives can be seen, in part through the verbatim play *The Girlfriend Experience*, and more fully through the *Sex Workers' Opera* project, discussed below.

There are clear and important differences between Heathcote's use of role-play, and the performative practices of sex workers, perhaps most crucially, the unlikelihood of the latter taking place within a safe, controlled environment, or being facilitated by a benevolent teacher/leader who will ensure role-players are protected as well as challenged. Additionally, Heathcote's preferred model of role-playing involves group, rather than individual, role-taking, another factor that appears at odds with the performance of sex work. Finally, the fictive cushion that protects the participants of a process drama can only be imagined by those whose role-play is enacted within the real world. However, the subtle ways in which these activities overlap and share ground, offer the potential to build on some of Pullen's theorisations of the performative work of sex workers. For example, Pullen (158-61) discusses the performative practices of escorts in relation to the sociological theories of Erving Goffman, as discussed in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman's focus on social role-play as a person's self-control or performance of outwardly observable behaviours, for example, to convey status, make a good impression, or convince others of feeling, offers some insights into the way sex workers may perform for their clients, and for other sections of society, but does not adequately explain how this might act as a liberating experience for its participants. Pullen (155-6) also draws on the work of Arlie Hochschild, who, in *The Managed Heart* (2012), defines the type of performance observed by Goffman as 'surface acting', and offers the contrasting idea of 'deep acting', where an actor 'expresses spontaneously [...] a real feeling that has been self-induced' through their 'work on feeling' as a way to understand the performance of 'emotional labour' increasingly required by modern employment (35). Hochschild connects her concept of 'deep acting' to the theories and practices of Constantin Stanislavski, in particular the device of 'emotion memory', and although she shows some confusion around the details of the System, and in fact refers more specifically to Method acting, it is from within this broad area of acting theory that she draws her theatrical metaphors (35-42). I argue that a third model of acting may be more useful to us here. In discussing the human costs of performing emotional labour, Hochschild defines three stances the worker can take: to identify wholeheartedly with the job and risk burnout; to clearly distinguish oneself from the job, but chastise oneself for a lack of sincerity; or to distinguish oneself from the job and take pride in the artfulness this requires (187). If we see the first position as closest to Hochschild's definition of deep acting, and the second as more reminiscent of Goffman's surface acting, what then is this third stance, which Hochschild describes as a "'healthy" estrangement, a clear separation of self from role' (187)? Hochschild sees this stance as incorporating a knowing attitude towards both deep and surface acting, but the performative mode she is describing sounds more closely connected to the knowing self-awareness of a Brechtian or *gestic* actor, or the learner engaged in educative role-play. The aim here is not, as in Goffman, to perform to impress or convey status, but to perform to understand, empathise, process and experiment: to 'cope', as Heathcote explains, with emotions and situations too big to process normally, and to 'create' answers and possibilities to the questions they raise. I thus look to borrow Heathcote's terms 'coping work' and 'creative work', not to imply that the role-play undertaken by sex workers is synonymous with drama in education activities, but to assert that these twin concepts or aims can help expand our understanding of the performative practices of sex workers.

Heathcote asserts that for 'creative work' to be most effective, the taken roles should be, as far as possible, self-authored, allowing participants to push against restrictive expectations, and develop and strengthen agency (1991, 51). Likewise, Hochschild stresses the importance of '[w]orker control over the conditions of good acting' and the difficulties caused when 'the conditions of the "stage" are kept out of the hands of the actor' and 'the less she can influence her entrances and exits and the nature of her acting in between' (189). Clearly, desirable though they might be, these ideals are not always available to women engaged in sex-work. However, one way to move towards this mode of role-taking might be to adopt, like Kattrin, a Brechtian, *gestic* approach to performance, which enables a conscious and questioning 'quoting', rather than a Stanislavskian or Method adoption of role.

Thus, I propose that Brecht's mode of *gestic* acting and Heathcote's contrasting concepts of 'creative work' and 'coping work' could be useful paradigms through which to understand the adoption of role by prostitutes, not simply as a way to successfully perform their work, but as a protective strategy against the emotional cost of that labour, and/or as a means of gaining creative satisfaction from a form of labour that is regularly devalued by social attitudes and market forces. This model takes into consideration the concerns of both the pro-sex feminist perspective, and a radical feminist perspective; supporting, complicating and extending Pullen's more wholly positive reading of the relationship between prostitution and performance.

The rest of this article will consider these issues, as dramatized within three contemporary theatre pieces depicting prostitutes.<sup>5</sup> The three pieces chosen for discussion (Cora Bissett's and Stef Smith's *RoadKill*, Alecky Blythe's *The Girlfriend Experience* and Experimental Experience's co-devised *Sex Workers' Opera*) represent only a fraction of recent dramatic work on this topic, but have been selected for their various attempts to place the character of the prostitute as a central and subjective presence and voice within the work (not, crucially, as an absence or void at its centre, as in plays that revolve around the stories of murdered prostitutes, but focus mainly on the responses and attitudes of other stakeholders, such as Alecky Blythe's *London Road* and Simon Stephen's *Three Kingdoms*). It may be no coincidence that this approach has also fitted closely with my other intention: to focus on work written or co-authored by contemporary women. The three pieces have also been selected to demonstrate three contrasting attempts by their creators to capture a sense of authenticity: by basing the work on the experiences of a 'real woman' in *RoadKill*; by recording the voices of real women for *The Girlfriend Experience*; and by creating the production with a cast of sex workers in *Sex Workers' Opera*. My analyses of these works centre on close readings of the play texts, situated within an understanding of each plays' theatricality and stylistic choices. I also consider the critical reception of these works (as

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<sup>5</sup> This article includes discussion of Stef Smith's and Cora Bissett's 2010 play *RoadKill*, which focusses on sex-trafficking. Because of this, I use the more general term 'prostitution' rather than the more contemporary term 'sex work' here, in keeping with Amnesty USA's guidance that the latter term should only be used to describe 'the exchange of sexual services (involving sexual acts) between consenting adults', and not to describe situations '[w]here consent is absent for reasons including threat or use of force, deception, fraud, and abuse of power or involvement of a child' (Amnesty USA 2016, 3-4).

evidenced through contemporaneous reviews) as a marker of audience attitudes towards their staging, and the characters and issues depicted in each.

### 'Coping work': *RoadKill*

Pullen has acknowledged that, unlike the pro-sex prostitutes' rights movement, many prostitutes are 'not consciously trying to reshape definitions of female sexuality, but rather make sense of their own experience' (139). The need to make sense of, or find coping strategies to deal with, potentially troubling experiences fits more easily into a radical feminist narrative of the prostitute as victim, and tends to be found in emotive, politically intentioned theatre pieces, such as Cora Bissett's and Stef Smith's *RoadKill*. This play is one of a number of recent theatre works, created by feminist or women-centred theatre companies, working in conjunction with charities and organisations that campaign against, and support victims of, sex-trafficking. Other examples include The Paper Bird's *In A Thousand Pieces* (2008); and Lucy Kirkwood's *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it is alright now*, produced in 2009 by Clean Break and developed from work with the Poppy Project (who provide support, advocacy and accommodation for trafficked women) and the Helen Bamber Foundation (who provide practical and psychological support for refugees and asylum seekers, including victims of human trafficking). It is important to acknowledge here that the practices of sex-trafficking and child sexual exploitation depicted within this piece are unambiguously criminal and the enforced prostitution of their victims cannot be equated with prostitution as a whole (see footnote 5). Even so, a play that focuses on enforced prostitution will undoubtedly have an influence on some of its audience's views of prostitution as a whole, and thus the work could be considered to have two layers of ethical responsibility.

*RoadKill* is a site-specific, promenade piece, first presented through the Traverse Theatre as part of the 2010 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and was developed by Smith as writer, from a concept by director Bissett.<sup>6</sup> The team were keen to stress the authenticity of their text 'based on true events', amalgamated from case studies and from Bissett's relationship with 'a young girl who was trafficked to Scotland from Africa' and 'confided her story to me' (Bissett and Smith 2011, n.p.). The play's central character, a teenaged Nigerian, re-named Mary by her abductors, is forced to work in a UK brothel, having been trafficked to the country under false pretences. Although the brothel is ostensibly run by an older Nigerian woman, Martha, who claims that '[t]he women rule here [...]. We are the ones with the power' (37), the events of the play show this statement to be demonstrably untrue. Martha is a hard, cruel woman because her experiences have forced her to be so to survive. She is violent, aggressive and controlling towards Mary and the other girls in the brothel (who we hear of but never meet), because their pimp, Djall, is violent, aggressive and controlling towards her. Thus the play's two female characters occupy two distinct, but linked, subjectivities: total victim and victim-cum-perpetrator. There is no element of choice or control open to Mary, who finds herself trapped in a strange country, without friends, her passport taken from her; and there is very

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<sup>6</sup> Audience members met at the Traverse, before being transported by bus to a domestic location.

little choice open to Martha, who is beholden to Djall's financial demands and sporadic violence.

It is not, then, surprising that this play presents role-playing as a very dark activity. Martha instructs the child prostitute Mary to play sexy for her clients like 'a proper grown-up lady' (41). She intervenes because a client has just refused to pay for Mary's substandard services ('Girl looked like she was about to cry, major turn-off' (39)). Initially furious, Martha realises she may get better results from Mary with a change of tactic: 'Look let's play a game', she offers, 'I'll be the man and you be you'. She instructs Mary in how to 'pretend to recognise' her clients and say 'Hello my name is Mary, I am here for your pleasure' 'very *sexily*' (40). At first, Mary's delivery of her 'line' is '*goofy and terrible*', but with further rehearsal becomes '*[a] little better*', and finally, '*[d]isturbingly good*' (40-1). 'It is like acting', Martha tells her, explicitly, 'Just pretend. Like on MTV. Always pretend...' (41).

The reality behind the pretence Martha encourages Mary to make is brutally revealed when Martha needs to get rid of a somewhat sympathetic punter, who shows concern for Mary and wants to take her to a hospital when she begins to bleed during sex. Keen that this should not happen, Martha tries to scare the man away by implying that he might be responsible for Mary's bleeding. 'She was enjoying it, she always enjoys it', he protests. 'Enjoyed what', confronts Martha, 'You raping her?' 'I didn't rape her!' the man insists, 'she's... a prostitute. It's her job!' Martha asks Mary, 'did you want to have sex?' in response to which '*Mary shakes her head*' (48). Mary's act may have succeeded in temporarily convincing her customers, but it is not meant to convince us. It is not the knowing *gestic* 'quotation' of an act which Mary is familiar with and from which she can borrow power, but a hollow mimicking, devoid of agency. Whilst role-play may assist Mary in coping with the tasks she is required to perform, this is clearly of more benefit to those who abuse and exploit her than it is to herself, and therefore role-play as 'coping work' cannot be seen as a positive strategy within this play. Mary's powerlessness is underscored by the naturalistic way in which the actors inhabit character within this play. Whilst the piece as a whole contains various elements of stylisation, in particular the use of multi-media video and soundscapes, and Mary's character does address the audience directly, she does so entirely in character, and the site-specific nature of the piece is intended to heighten rather than undercut its realism. Consequently, this allows for no Brechtian 'knowingness', comment on, or challenge to the play, the part, or the act of role-playing within the role. Furthermore, unlike the sex workers depicted in the next two pieces, Mary's role-playing is entirely solitary and isolated, offering none of the support or protection of group role-taking practices.

Reviews suggest *RoadKill* was largely well received by sympathetic audiences. Although Lyn Gardner acknowledges that it was 'by no means a perfect production', she does not elaborate her criticisms, concluding instead that it is 'an almightily powerful one' (Gardner 2010). Much of this power seems to originate from the play's intimate site-specific setting, which Gardner considered brought the issues within the production 'up close and personal', even suggesting that it 'doesn't feel as if this is just a play'. Gardner also describes the uncomfortable role into which the play's audience are cast, describing them as 'ghostly voyeurs' who struggle to 'meet each other's eye'. Other reviewers felt similarly disquieted by



the play's juxtaposition of a familiar, intimate, domestic environment with its shocking political content, and many saw this as an added provocation to take action. Writing in *The List*, Kirstin Innes concludes, 'We're handed information afterwards about how to help. Let's' (Innes 2010), and responding to the 2011 London transfer of the original production, Philip Fisher, comments:

The idea that these depravities could be going on in houses just along the Jubilee Line from home is enough to make anyone want the authorities to sit up and take action. That more than anything is a mark of the quality of Cora Bissett's marvellous invention. *Roadkill* could change lives for the better and nobody could ask for more from a theatrical piece. (Fisher 2011)

However, Fisher does not suggest how this positive change could occur, an uncertainty highlighted more directly by Gardner:

[I]t does also raise uncomfortable questions about theatre's and the audience's responsibilities. Are we simply staring at the animals in the zoo, or will we actually act after seeing the show; file it away under "interesting experience" or do something? The power of the piece is that you cannot forget the laughing girl in the white dress; nor should you. She's out there somewhere running for her life. (Gardner 2011)

Comments under Gardner's article are exclusively focussed on this section of her review, with readers, problematically, arguing amongst themselves about whether the call to action is devalued by the fact it 'IS fiction, it's made up' or validated by being based on a 'REAL young girl' [sic].

A number of key points emerge from our consideration of this piece. Firstly, we have seen that, unsurprisingly, a radical feminist perspective that focusses on a criminal and exploitative form of prostitution does not present the performative role-play of prostitutes as a positive or empowering strategy. However, it can be seen to depict it as an - albeit limited - form of 'coping work'. Secondly, we can note that a perceived sense - or lack - of authenticity within the play's narrative origins and setting seems to have been crucial to both the artists' conception and the public's appreciation of this play's themes and issues. This is also a key concern of the creation, presentation and reception of next two theatrical pieces I will consider.

### **Moving towards 'creative work': *The Girlfriend Experience***

Alecky Blythe's *The Girlfriend Experience* represents consensual prostitution, taking a position closer to pro-sex or sex positive feminism. A verbatim play, first produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 2008, it features the words and narratives of real women working as prostitutes, as recorded by Blythe in a Bournemouth brothel, and delivered nightly into the headphones of its performers: a technique devised by Blythe to ensure the most accurate reproduction of the intonation of the original interviews.

Most of the play's four women posit their experiences in broadly positive terms, speaking of sex work as a legitimate career choice:

**Tessa** I've always looked at this as not (*Beat.*) - anything but a career. (*Beat.*) This is my career - this is my job, it's like going down to Sainsbury's and putting things on the shelf, it's exactly - the same thing I just do a different thing. But to me this is a job - I clock in, I clock out, it's as simple as that. (*Pause.*) It's - like I say, it is my career, it's something that I - actually enjoy doing, / to a point.

**Suzie** And it's / your choice.

**Tessa** - Yes - it is - it has to be, my choice, if I didn't want to do it, I wouldn't do it - (Blythe 2010, 16)

Later, Suzie goes further, raising her profession to the status of some that are traditionally considered more skilled, worthy and desirable: 'part of the role', she explains, 'is that (*Beat.*) - you do, be-come (*Beat.*) - a sex-therapist-stroke-counsellor (*Beat.*) - to a lot of people' (54). The play features several incidents that seem to support the women's view of their work as something they choose and have control over. In one scene, Tessa demonstrates the control she has over her work when she turns away a client, who she considers a 'disgusting, old - dirty filthy old man. Very abrasive on these. (*Indicating her chest.*) He just repulses me and I'm thinking do I really need the money that badly? No I don't' (58). We hear her explaining her position (somewhat more subtly) to the client, and the client take three pages of dialogue to try and wheedle and guilt her into giving him 'just a farewell' (63). The scene is intensely awkward, but never aggressive or abusive. Tessa retains a solid position throughout, and the client leaves quietly with the comment, 'look after yourself' (64).

In terms of role-play and metatheatre, the play contains several passages where the women relate their work explicitly to acting:

**Suzie** You know, it gives you confidence.

**Tessa** You become - an-other person. (*Beat.*) It's like -

**Suzie** *You*, fundamentally,/but with a different layer -

**Tessa** Yeah, a (*Beat.*) - yeah, *yeah* - it's a stage - (*Softly.*) It is a stage. (*Beat.*) And you go an' (*Whispers.*) - *create*.

*The doorbell rings.*

*Beat.*

Here we go.

*TESSA exits the sitting room and goes to answer the door.*

**Suzie** Oh God, I'm not ready - shut the door. (17)

Quite apart from Tessa's and Suzie's conscious evocation of theatrical metaphor, this passage is ripe with theatrical convention. As in a traditional backstage setting, the performance is signalled by the ringing of a bell. This provokes Tessa to answer her cue, and Suzie to panic about her unpreparedness, shutting the door to hide the private, backstage world from the entering 'audience'.<sup>7</sup> The women in *The Girlfriend Experience* perform to their clients, not only in person, but when answering the telephone. We are told that Tessa '*takes on her businesslike telephone voice*', and describes herself in the third person when speaking to clients on the phone, an act reminiscent of a Brechtian or *gestic* approach to role-taking.

Due to the verbatim nature of the piece, its metatheatricity occurs not only in the women's acknowledgement of the theatrical nature of their work, but in their knowing references to the play their testimonies will form. Tessa is very aware of the negativity around the cultural representation of sex work and, although she expresses some ambivalence towards the idea of seeing and hearing her largely unedited self on stage, she is clear that

that's 'ow I, I wannit to *be*, because it's showing that, that, it - that we *are* real. (*Beat.*) An', hopefully, people w-will appreciate that we're not all crackheads, an', you know w-what we're *painted* as, what these people like Jerry (*Beat.*) - Jeremy Kyle (*Beat.*) - you were, you know, you say the word 'prostitute' 'Oh so you're *scum*' - you know, 'you've wasted your *life*, you're - y'you know, you're *noth-ing*, you could be *bet-ter*'. (57-8)

It would be wrong to imply that the play presents a wholly positive view of the experiences of sex workers. Tessa has set up her business in response to her frustration with previous brothels in which she has worked. Amongst her complaints with these, she cites 'being told what to do and how to do it', 'they're takin' fifty per cent of your money', and 'Girlies - that were doing things, that I didn't approve of - erm - especially the foreigners - erm, doing everything for nothing' (13).<sup>8</sup> However, Tessa's claim that 'finding a place on my *own* (*Beat.*) - especially with the back-up of the other two - ladies (*Beat.*) - just made sense' seems a credible, feminist statement. These women are not controlled by an aggressive pimp like Djall, and although Tessa is nominally in charge of the business, her brothel seems to operate as a collective, whose members provide not only practical and logistical support for one another, but also a considerable degree of moral and emotional solidarity. Tessa is clearly a compassionate woman, who shows this compassion to her fellow sex workers, who in turn show it to the majority of their clients. Thus, these women experience role-taking within an environment that shares more of the protective and supportive characteristics of a group role-playing scenario, in contrast to the isolated experience of Mary in *RoadKill*.

<sup>7</sup> This sequence bears considerable relation to Pullen's observations of Madison escorts performing in a way which highlights Goffman's distinctions between 'front' and 'back' (Pullen 2005 159-61).

<sup>8</sup> In the majority of plays encountered during this project, a greater degree of victim status is attached to 'foreign' sex workers (who are often presented as victims of sex-trafficking). This suggests a need for future work to look at these representations, not just through a feminist theoretical framework, but also a post-colonial one. Likewise, there are further discussion to be had around the issue of social class, provoked both by the statements made by the women in the play (such as Tessa's acknowledgement that people like her are often assumed to be 'crackheads' and 'scum'), and by Blythe's decision to reproduce their speech and dialect phonetically in the play text.

Yet, even in this most egalitarian of brothels, the women experience problems as a result of their work. A number of their romantic relationships are complicated or tainted by the fact that men (in both cases men they initially met as punters) expect a level of constant sexual availability and transgression that the women are not looking to replicate in their personal lives. Whether this is a problem created by the existence of prostitution, or the patriarchal perception of prostitution, is a moot point. Additionally, having previously presented her role-playing as a positive opportunity to 'create', at the very end of the play, Tessa delivers an intimate monologue in which she acknowledges, 'I'm *not* - me, when I do it. (*Beat.*) I-it's (*Beat.*) - actress Tessa, it's (*Beat.*) - i-it makes me (*Beat.*) - be able to disappear' (73). These words make the act sound more like 'coping work', and such sentiments hint at the potential damage caused by even these more empowered engagements with sex work, though perhaps this potential damage merely sits on a continuum of potentially damaging experiences that all women face, whether or not they work as prostitutes. Suzie acknowledges that, as a sex worker, 'I'm treated better than some boyfriends have treated me in the past', linking her work directly to wider issues of misogyny, inequality and the mistreatment of women (18). Whether sex work exacerbates and legitimises broader sexual inequalities, as is argued by radical feminists, or, as the pro-sex lobby posits, offers women transgressive possibilities to escape hetero-normative gender relations is a complex question that this text, of course, cannot resolve.

One of the most striking features of the critical reception of the original production of this play (which transferred to the Young Vic in 2009) is the thinly-veiled repulsion shown towards its ensemble of characters. 'There's no point in not saying that these huge and unappetising women come across as being incredibly sad and curiously stupid, with their whale-like lolloping around', writes Michael Coveney in the *Independent* (Coveney 2009). Dominic Cavendish in the *Telegraph*, though more favourably disposed to the production overall, is equally keen to draw attention to the women's weight and size, describing them variously as 'lumpen', 'sagging cushions', 'tubby' and a 'perky pudding', as well as pronouncing, bafflingly, that they 'can't match Rachel Weiss in the looks department' (Cavendish 2009). Whilst much of this negativity comes, predictably, from conservative, white, male critics, even Lyn Gardner's review in the *Guardian* highlights that when the women describe themselves as 'curvy' this really 'means obese' (Gardner 2009). Unlike reviews of *RoadKill* which praise the authenticity and power of its representation of a vulnerable, trafficked, teenage prostitute (a type seemingly well-recognised by critics), these reviews seem repulsed by the fact the women depicted on stage in *The Girlfriend Experience* are not what we might expect a prostitute to be.

Critics also highlight the moral ambiguity of the women's work, with Coveney suggesting 'an argument against this being degradation and exploitation is [not] easily mounted [...] by saying that a) the girls are happy in their work or b) their choice of it is a sign of liberation, not repression'. Rather, he concludes, 'these big girls in big underwear are really just social flotsam, kidding themselves into dreams of belonging' (Coveney 2009). Cavendish begins more positively, though still patronisingly, asserting that for these women, 'Selling their bodies has been a means of saving themselves' (from what is unclear), but

qualifies that their 'vulnerability is palpable despite the airy bravado of their uninhibited chatter'. He concludes with the statement: 'You could say that this refreshingly dispassionate show represents a triumph for the PVC brigade over the PC brigade but the emotional costs of prostitution aren't shirked' (Cavendish 2009). Whilst, as discussed above, it is right to note that this play does not attempt to represent the women's work as wholly unproblematic, reviewers show a far greater tendency to view the characters as victims who may have convinced themselves otherwise, than to take their positivity towards their work at face value. Furthermore, Gardner questions whether the women are victims, not just of their employment, but of Blythe's theatrical project. 'Whose life is it anyway? Whose play?' begins her review, which ends by fleshing out this concern:

you start to wonder whether it serves its own interests rather than its subjects – and what exactly was on the other 98-plus hours of tape. Only if the women themselves had had a say in the edit would the show avoid accusations of prurience and the suspicion that it sets them up to be laughed at, not with. (Gardner 2009)

Unlike her review of *RoadKill*, which appears satisfied with a fictionalised account of sex-trafficking apparently based on the stories of real women, the presence of the (albeit edited and re-performed) real words of real women in this piece seem to present Gardner with more grounds to be suspicious of the play's claim to authenticity.

Whilst this play, arguably, has a far greater claim towards authenticity than *RoadKill*, its more pro-sex feminist depiction of prostitution largely as 'creative work' that lends it participants agency and expression, albeit retaining some problematic elements more suggestive of 'coping work', seems to have been harder for critics to swallow. Perhaps, Blythe's audio-delivered verbatim created a distancing effect that proved less persuasive than the intimate intensity of *RoadKill*'s site-specific presentation. However, Coveney (2009) argues that the device did not have such an effect, complaining that '[t]here's no attempt to suggest some sort of interesting dislocation between the actor and the material; all four girls are well defined characters battling against the depersonalizing process', and other reviews do not suggest the audience was cast in anything but a conventional role. And even if the distancing effect was there, whilst it might explain why the response to the piece was not the outrage and sympathy seemingly invoked by Bissett's and Smith's play, it is unclear why this device would lead to ridicule and patronising pity. Rather, the critical response towards this work seems symptomatic of the tendency to dismiss sex worker's voices. However, the final production to be discussed goes one step further than verbatim representation, using not only the words but the bodies of sex workers on stage.

### **'Creative work': *Sex Workers' Opera***

First presented as a one-off performance at London's Courtyard Theatre in May 2014, and further developed for extended runs at the Arcola (2015) and Islington's Pleasance (2016), *Sex Workers' Opera* carries the direct political objective of providing a 'platform for sex workers' voices'. 'If art is constantly about sex work, which it is: people are obsessed with

it, there's only so much you can stand before people start taking it back and reclaiming it,' explains Siobhan Knox, whose company XX – Experimental Experience produced and developed the piece, with initial support from a new writing scheme at the Royal Opera House (Filar 2016), and subsequent funding from the Arts Council and a 'Kickstarter' crowd funding campaign. But this is not, as with Blythe's work, a platform for *pre-recorded* voices. The company that devised and perform the cabaret-style show, combining music and dance numbers with scenes and sketches, are made up of at least fifty per cent sex workers; the rest are described as 'their friends', and a deliberate attempt not to differentiate between the two groups during production, in performance or in publicity, has been made (Sex Workers' Opera website). Thus, the 'creative work' of sex workers, engaged within a supportive group environment, is key to the conception of this piece. The production asserts that, whilst many of its cast are not trained or professional theatre performers, the role of sex work has been good preparation for cast members now taking a role on stage. 'Sex workers are natural improvisers', explains Knox, 'it does appear to be part of the job' (cited in Beale 2016). Cast member, 'Vera', who has worked variously as a journalist, photographer, go-go dancer, burlesque artist, stripper and peep-show worker, agrees that a 'lot of sex work involves acting all the time. I've always performed – on different kinds of stages, but I've always been on stage' (cited in Fane Saunders 2016). Reviewers note the 'astonishing vocal – and pole-dancing – talent' contained within the cast, further blurring the boundary between sex work and other, more legitimised, forms of performance (Beale 2016).

The production (which has not been published as a text, but sections of which can be viewed online as part of a documentary by Manu Valcarce) is quick to establish its distance from radical feminist attitudes towards prostitution. The show opens with a mocking portrayal of this position: a severe-looking woman dressed demurely as a feminist stereotype in a knee-length beige skirt, thick black tights, black cardigan and court shoes, her mousy hair tied into a ponytail, strides onto the stage and berates the audience:

What are you all doing here? What is wrong with you? You should be ashamed of yourself! Coming to see women who have been abused and exploited paraded on the stage like pieces of meat! Why are you all just sitting there? (cited in Valcarce 2015)

We hear the opening strains of clarinet music, suggesting a different tone, but the woman continues, unabashed: 'You're a disgrace! What's wrong with you? Stand up right now and march out with me! Say no to the [theatre in question] putting on this sexist -' At this point the woman is interrupted by another who has taken the stage, dressed contrastingly in black thong, bra and heels. 'My friend', she begins to sing, 'you know I sympathise -'. Horrified and visibly embarrassed, the first woman shrinks away to the corner of the stage. Another woman in long black stockings and a leopard-print basque enters and picks up the song: 'but how can you call it freedom, telling me what to do with my thighs'. More women enter, all singing to the same tune:

You say you want to fight for me,

But how can you be my voice when victim's all you see.

Please open up your eyes, I have a choice.

I am not your mission, I'm a human.

I'm old enough by now to know my mind.

So don't make this up for me. [\(ibid\)](#)

Note 'this' not 'it' in the lyric above. The cast make a direct plea, not only to be allowed to make their own minds up, as indicated in the line before, but also to tell their own stories on stage.

Overall, though not exclusively, these stories are positive, a fact that is further underlined by Valcarce's documentary. It is no surprise to hear one cast member, Charlotte Rose (a vocal proponent of the rights of sex workers, who has twice stood as an independent candidate for parliament on a ticket promoting 'sexual freedom'), present the work in this light. Rose, like Suzie in *The Girlfriend Experience*, describes her work as close to that of a 'personal therapist' (Rose cited in Valcarce 2015). Two other cast members, on which the documentary focuses, are equally proud of their profession; 'Melina' speaks thoughtfully about her work:

I feel like this is actually what I want to do, and I haven't been in a job where I feel so happy and fulfilled. It's an amazing thing that I have people who pay me to have sex, but who also trust me and who put like, kind of, their vulnerability, and who put their fantasies, desires, perversions in my hands to work with it. I think that's really powerful. ('Melina' cited in Valcarce 2015)

Melina's heartfelt description of her work as powerful and her clients as vulnerable directly contradicts stereotypical depictions of the prostitute as victim.

The production received some criticism that it was trying to 'glamorise' the sex industry, but its production team insist that it wishes to present this type of work not as bad, or good, but simply human (*This Morning*). Despite the rather mocking portrayal of radical feminist arguments in its opening scene, other sections of the show take such concerns more seriously, using a recurring narrative between a sex worker and her anti-sex work feminist mother, who is intended to raise 'the "burning questions" audience members might want answered' (Beale 2016). This reflects Pullen's assessment that pro-sex approaches to the representation of prostitution are more likely to 'encompass multiple perspectives' (Pullen 2005, 152).

Despite some criticism from what the company describe as 'prohibitionist' sources (Kelly 2016), the critical response to the work from mainstream sources has been largely positive. Whilst some headlines seem intended to provoke titillation (Kelly 2016), the thinly veiled disgust and disapproval levelled at the women portrayed in *The Girlfriend Experience* is missing from the coverage of this piece, as is the concern that the piece itself may be exploiting its participants. In fact, sources highlight how favourably sex workers speak of their involvement with the project:

The Sex Workers' Opera, I have to say is one of the most exciting projects I've been part of. It has given me the chance to explore, not only my happiness in my career as a sex worker, it has given me the chance to heal all my pain that I have suffered in my life. It has given me the chance to make poetry with my life.

('Vera' cited in Valcarce 2015)

*Sex Workers' Opera* features the creative presentation of the stories and bodies of real sex workers, albeit viewed by an audience through a theatrical filter, which inherently implies deliberate selection, arrangement and conscious artistry. It is unclear whether the more positive critical response to the *Sex Workers' Opera* (in relation to reviews of *The Girlfriend Experience*) can be accounted for by the seemingly greater degree of authenticity provided by not only taking the words of sex workers, but hearing them from their own lips. The cabaret format of the production also facilitates a more direct, knowing, *gestic* or Brechtian mode of performance from those on stage, and a less awkwardly voyeuristic, more actively engaged role for the audience, both of which may help to convince audiences that these women have more control or agency over the representations they are performing. Other contributing factors may include the expectations established by presenting the latter work at more 'alternative' venues (the Pleasance and the Arcola, rather than the Royal Court and the Young Vic for *The Girlfriend Experience*) and – more worryingly – the degree to which the two casts conformed to conventional notions of desirability.

All the theatre pieces discussed in this article highlight the performativity of prostitution, either by depicting the role-playing prostitutes may use as 'coping work' to distance themselves from the task at hand, or by celebrating and showcasing the 'creative work' of sex workers, both on and off the traditional stage. My readings of these works support Kirsten Pullen's assertion that role-play, and other forms of performance, allow prostitutes and sex workers some opportunity to control and configure their own experiences, by demonstrating that this is a strategy used by both the real-life and fictional prostitutes represented in these pieces. However, I also highlight the gulf between the positive experiences of 'creative work' reported by sex workers who participated in the *Sex Workers' Opera*, and the unfavourable depiction of role-play as 'coping work' in *RoadKill*.

To better understand this distinction, we can perhaps return to Heathcote, and consider her assertion that for 'creative work' to be most effective, the taken roles should be, as far as possible, self-authored and designed to strengthen agency (1991, 51). As we have seen, Mary's adoption of role in *RoadKill* is not self-authored, nor does it promote agency. The women depicted in *The Girlfriend Experience* move closer towards these ideals, but still raise questions about their degree of authorship, not only of the roles they take in their working lives, but also of the play itself. Finally, the creators of *Sex Workers' Opera* demonstrate this agency most convincingly by performing their own devised material. Similarly, each piece moves closer towards the traditional protective and supportive ideals of group role-taking.



It is not surprising that within a political context where notions of self-representation and hidden or marginalised voices are so pressing, the various claims towards authenticity and agency that these productions make hold a particular interest for critics, audiences and those who have produced them. Whilst in all cases, we must be wary and maintain a critical and questioning attitude to claims of authenticity, I propose that there are clear differentiations to be made between the degree of agency offered, variously, by basing a play on true events (*RoadKill*), using the voices of real people as the subject for verbatim drama (*The Girlfriend Experience*), or involving those people as the co-creators and performers of all material (*Sex Workers' Opera*). Following a reverse trajectory, the performance styles of these three pieces move away from the psychological realism and immersive site-specific setting of *RoadKill*; through a unique style of audio-delivered verbatim, seemingly intended to assure 'authentic' delivery, rather than undercut it, in *The Girlfriend Experience*; and finally to a knowing, *gestic* mode of cabaret performance in *Sex Workers' Opera*, suggesting that an 'authenticity' of voice, and the agency of those represented, is better facilitated by a Brechtian approach that lays bare the device than a naturalistic attempt to conceal it.

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