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‘You’re funnier when you’re angry’

Affirmation, responsibility and commitment in David Hoyle’s live performance practice

DANIEL OLIVER

David Hoyle’s creative career spans painting, installation, television, film-making and stage and screen acting, but he is most well known as an improvising performance artist who appears with an anarchically androgynous aesthetic on the UK’s LGBTQ avant-garde cabaret scene. This is a genre that brings the avant-garde ideologies of the twentieth century, defined by Günter Berghaus as an ‘opposition to the established canons of art [that] went hand in hand with a battle against the guardians of tradition and social propriety’ into pub and club performance and entertainment (2006: 14). For Hoyle this means, for example, juxtapositions of jaunty songs and explicit performance art, or humorously mocking exchanges with audience members that spill over into jarring and uncompromising political diatribes. The two performances that I discuss here are *Lauren Harries Sober* (2008), performed at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern in London (RVT) on 22 April and *David Hoyle’s Factory: A sweatshop for the soul* (2011), performed at the Chelsea Theatre, London, on 12 and 13 November, as part of the ‘Sacred’ festival. I watched video documentation of *Lauren Harries Sober* and was in the audience on the second evening of *David Hoyle’s Factory: A sweatshop for the soul*.

My analysis of Hoyle’s complex and productively troubled relationship with affirmation (here understood as an act of agreeing with something and of perpetuating that thing through agreement) is attentive to the context of Hoyle’s ongoing practice and focuses on two moments of audience interaction that occurred in these performances.¹ The first of these moments, which occurred in *Lauren Harries Sober*,

consisted of an audience member shouting ‘Don’t be fucking mean’ at Hoyle during his onstage interview with Harries. The second, at the Chelsea Theatre, involved a comparatively docile and benevolent Hoyle being criticized by an audience member for not being angry enough and, consequently, not being funny enough. My reading of these moments emerges from the observation that Hoyle immerses his audiences in a hilarious and uncomfortable menagerie of affirmation, allegiance, responsibility and complicity. In expanding my attention to a wider engagement with Hoyle’s practice, I discuss what I see as his implicit request for a commitment to an ongoing performance project and a series of fragmentary and occasionally contradictory causes. In summary, my interest is in how Hoyle manages to immerse himself and his audiences in affirmation, while repeatedly performing and demonstrating the complexities and limitations of the subjects and causes affirmed.

Hoyle has performed in the UK and internationally since the 1980s but, despite this longevity, there is a scarcity of academic writing about his output. Four critics who have engaged with his work are Gavin Butt, Dominic Johnson, Fintan Walsh and myself. It is useful here to bring summaries of their approaches together with my own to contextualize the experience Hoyle offers, which I will then develop in my analysis of audience interaction. Butt observes how Hoyle’s performances are immersed in a tone he describes as a ‘peculiar mix of camp and sincerity’ (2013: 44). For Butt, there is a persistent foregrounding of playfulness, desire and irreverence that productively interferes with the sincerity and

¹ While I offer lengthy descriptions of these performances below, it is worth disclosing my own affirmation of a confession that Gavin Butt makes at the end of his recent writing on Hoyle: ‘Nothing I have written here can contain him’ (2013: 58).

seriousness of Hoyle's outspoken politics (2013). Butt identifies a striking example of this phenomenon in Hoyle's frequent castigation of 'his male spectators for aping oppressive forms of machismo with their gym-honed bodies, only to admit, in the next breath, his own desire to fuck them' (p. 50). Through analysis of this tone, Butt celebrates how Hoyle works against the problematic, elitist posturing of earnestness and conviction that can be found in much mainstream politics and academia (2013). Hoyle's fluxing and irreverent material and delivery is framed by Butt as a vital method of undermining the exclusivity (enveloped in issues of class) that art and scholarly worlds maintain (2013). Thus, Butt's approach to Hoyle's performances, which informs my reading, describes the inclusive, democratizing effect of this refusal of reverence (2013: 39–60). In an article pitting Hoyle's spontaneity and radicality against dominant, normative forms of theatre and performance, Johnson neatly captures Hoyle's gender-queer aesthetic in the term 'a *maquillage* car-crash' (2007: 12, emphasis in original). He also notes Hoyle's didactic attachment to resisting normativity and consumerism (p. 12). Johnson observes how Hoyle drags his audience into collusion with this cause through an 'abrasive pedagogy, formulating this style as terroristic tactics to be launched against the shibboleths of both mainstream and minority cultures' (p. 12). In *Theatre & Therapy* Walsh describes how Hoyle's performances are entangled, in a complex and raucous manner, with therapeutic formats and exchanges (2013: 66–9). Concentrating on *Dave's Drop-in Centre* (2009), a series of shows that occurred at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern (RVT) in London, Walsh, like Johnson, notes Hoyle's explicit openness about his own history of being subject to brutal, homophobic bullying as well as his unabashed challenges to the 'self-loathing, narcissism and complacency that Hoyle perceives among the gay community' (p. 67). For Walsh, Hoyle's performance practice displays a 'marrying' of 'cabaret with Theatre of Cruelty' that, in the case of *Dave's Drop-in Centre*, 'transforms the social space of a London

pub into a place where defences are dropped, if not bludgeoned, and you come away feeling all the better for it' (p. 68). My previous critical engagement with Hoyle's practice discussed the abrupt shifts in tone that undermine any easy categorization of his practice as either convivial or antagonistic (2012). I observed 'car-crash' moments in publicly engaged performances where seemingly convivial encounters with participants slipped into acerbic outbursts of vitriol, or where an unnerving trajectory towards outrage and provocation was overturned as Hoyle conjured a mood of ecstatic geniality (2012). Here I build on these critical analyses of Hoyle's camp sincerity, raucous pedagogy, unabashed self-exposure and radical spontaneity. I expand them by engaging with the blurred layering of authority and unequivocalty with fragility and ambiguity that amount to Hoyle's compromised breed of affirmation. In my experience, this blurring productively troubles attempts to capture succinctly the causes, acts and ideologies that he affirms, or to perform a straightforward reading of the words and actions that affirm them.

LAUREN HARRIES SOBER

Lauren Harries Sober was the seventh of eleven weekly shows, collectively entitled *Magazine* (2008). This was the third and final run of Hoyle's *Magazine* performances (2006, 2007, 2008), in which each interlinked show addressed a different 'issue'. In the second series of *Magazine* performances (2007), Lauren Harries, a post-op male-to-female transsexual who was briefly famous as a young boy due to his television appearances as an expert in antiques, was invited to contribute as an interviewee in Hoyle's *Antiques Roadshow* issue (2007). The degeneration of this previous interview into a drunken confrontation led to Harries being invited to return for the third series.

Lauren Harries Sober opened with Hoyle dancing whimsically to Noel Coward's 'Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage', possibly chosen as a light poke at Harries' previous

gin-soaked appearance. Many of Hoyle's performances open with a similar song and dance routine, in which he points and smiles at members of the audience he recognizes, takes on 'expressionist dance' poses and shows off particularly compelling parts of his outfit (his long decorated nails in this instance). He often cuts off the record halfway through, saying, 'that's enough', and then shifts abruptly from a heavily stylized performance to a more pedestrian tone as he introduces the show. The audience were warned that things were going to get 'quite cerebral' and Lauren Harries was invited onstage as a 'beautiful human being'. After a friendly start, in which they laughed about their previous intoxicated altercation, an unsettling edge developed when Harries suggested that Hoyle should show his sensitive side more often. This led to a reference to the previous week's 'issue', *Arts Council* (15 April 2008), which included a short piece by guest performance artist Puta, that involved onstage defecation. Harries described this act as 'disgusting' and, in Butt's (2008) and my own observation, it is at this point that the tone quickly shifted and a stream of increasingly unpleasant insults and accusations were exchanged. By 20 minutes into the performance the audience had split into supporters of either Hoyle or Harries. Loud, supportive chanting of 'Lauren' disrupted the interview, alongside similar interventions on behalf of Hoyle. These interventions from both factions of the audience continued to build, and included a moment in which a man declared that while he has 'adored' and 'respected' Hoyle 'for many years' he wanted him to stop being 'mean'. Hoyle all but ignored this intervention and the open vilification towards him from both Harries' followers and some of his own and the exchange of insults continued. Later, in an interview with Butt, Hoyle showed no sign of remorse, remaining insistent that Harries lacks humility, is reactionary and uninformed, and 'started it' (2008: 31). This defence made up part of a defiant stance in response to the refusal by many members of the audience to affirm Hoyle's words and actions:

Being vilified by his own audience was, he says, a 'horrific feeling' but 'I also knew there was an integrity to it. If I wanted to maintain where I was coming from it wasn't going to be an easy ride for anybody, me included, because I was bringing elements of northern stand up, and northern brusque, and being very direct with the questions. But I did find it difficult.' He impresses upon me the importance of taking such risks, of even being prepared to lose his audience. 'I think it makes it livelier. When we're grown up and mature we realise that not everyone is going to like us. And that's OK.' (pp. 32–3)

In the heckler's intervention we have an example of an audience member who has committed to the overarching Hoylian 'project': 'adoring' and 'respecting' Hoyle for many years but refusing to act affirmatively towards Hoyle's actions and words that evening. Hoyle rejects any need for this affirmation, wilfully risking an unpopularity that could, in turn, compromise the continuation of his practice. Thus, in embracing a position described by Hoyle as a 'pantomime villain' (Butt 2008: 32), Hoyle demonstrates a commitment to a cause larger than the experience of individual performances. But despite Hoyle's resilient affirmation of this cause, demonstrated through a willingness to risk his livelihood for it, the cause itself is difficult to pin down and emerges as fragmented and unfixed. For example, in his interview with Butt, on the one hand, Hoyle articulates his commitment to humility and tolerance and his aggressive stance against the superiority, conservatism and judgementalism he observed in Harries' comments and attitude (Butt 2008: 31–3). On the other hand, there is a dedication to brashness (attributed to being from the north of England), liveliness and keeping things 'real' that leads to an unabashed positioning of racist English comedian Bernard Manning as 'the greatest avant garde artist that there is' (p. 34). There is also Hoyle's insistence that he should betray his own 'ignorance and prejudice' instead of being 'PC'ed up to the eyeballs' (p. 31). Butt concludes his article by summarizing and celebrating these ideological flips and turns as part of the 'glorious and unpredictable performances of contradictions'

(p. 34). For me, the potential glory lies in the way Hoyle indulges in, and offers up, the satisfaction and security of commitment and affirmation without the need for a problematically totalizing and unobtainably infallible cause to commit to and affirm.

DAVID HOYLE'S FACTORY:
A SWEATSHOP FOR THE SOUL

David Hoyle's Factory: A sweatshop for the soul presented its audience with a collision of trade union slogans and rhetoric with the artsy decadence and glitter of a 1960s studio party. As I entered the bar area of the Chelsea Theatre a man asked if I would be 'joining the union?' I replied 'yes', and was relieved I had done so when I saw that all the seating was labelled 'reserved for union members'. A woman, costumed between 1960s New York glamour and kinky science laboratory assistant, invited us to a long table in order to begin our interactive experience by doing some colouring in. While we could choose the colours, design and type of pen we used to engage in this activity, all the images to be decorated were identical – an outline of Hoyle's face reminiscent of the black and white images in Andy Warhol's silkscreen painting *Marilyn Diptych* (1962). There was, for me, the sense that the interactivity of this event was indulging a degree of mockery, possibly at the expense of the feel-good ethics and aesthetics of other contemporary, participatory performances. The dynamic was one of an awkwardly autocratic conviviality, in which an irreverent yet triumphantly rousing performance tone was layered with a deceptive, bait-and-switch attitude towards audience interaction and communal, relational activities. Instead of Hoyle's usual acerbic and abrasive outbursts, the uneasiness of this performance seemed to emerge more from Hoyle's desire 'to promise things and not deliver' (Hoyle quoted in Butt 2013: 51). In this show, the things Hoyle promised beforehand, in an interview with Paul Burston (2010), were 'creative participation', 'communal work' and 'immortality'. Hoyle's delivery on these

promises was partial, generating a humorous and uneasy contradiction between the causes affirmed in his words and the experience that the performance offered. This contradiction is captured in the moment of audience interaction that I describe below.

Having completed my colouring in and had my picture displayed among everyone else's at the back of the stage, I took my seat as Hoyle and his musicians entered. The rest of the show consisted of a friendlier version of the improvisatory avant-garde cabaret that Hoyle is known for. The interactions with audience members were gentler than the criticisms and insults that I have witnessed at the RVT. In Butt's reference to these merrier performances, he describes how fans 'remark upon the change of tone from one show to another. Sometimes audience members after a particular performance say that he [Hoyle] was in a good, cheery mood, explaining perhaps an unusually "light" show' (Burston 2010: 56). While this suggests a positive response to Hoyle's intermittent cheeriness, linked to Hoyle's canny ability to maintain unexpectedness on a show-by-show basis, in the midst of this particular 'light' show an audience member reacted by shouting out that Hoyle should 'get angry'. In her opinion, this was because he was 'funnier when he was angry'. Hoyle's response maintained the good feeling as he described his current good health, his love for all present and his refusal to pretend.

This performance, and its moment of audience interjection, relates to my analysis of affirmation and commitment in several ways. Despite its apparent cheeriness, the performance still resisted easy acquiescence to audience affirmation. Hoyle maintains the risks of turning his audience against him. While this is partly due to his bait-and-switch relationship to the communal creativity he promised, it is also embroiled in his refusal, this time, to play the 'pantomime villain'. Instead of performing as the entertaining baddie he rejects a pursuit of approval by staying true to his less-titillating good mood. He resists the opportunism of reducing himself to a constructed character,

ready to be summoned up for boos, hisses, thrills and hilarity and maintains a fidelity to an elusive cause that is dominated by a pursuit of integrity and keeping it 'real'.

COMMITMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY

Hoyle's explicit reference to his 'good health' in response to the heckler's demand for anger reminds those who encourage and affirm his performance practice of the potential irresponsibility of that affirmation. The implication is that, if cheeriness and lightness emerge from Hoyle being in good health, then his wilder, angrier and potentially more exhilarating performances might rely on, perpetuate or even trigger a harmful and destructive state of health. Hoyle frequently and explicitly reminds audiences of the possible connection between his most reckless, radical and hilarious acts and words, and his battles with mental health problems, alcoholism and a traumatic past. As discussed, he also, in performances such as *Lauren Harries Sober*, continues with a perceived destructive behaviour, despite the clear indication by many in the audience that they refuse to affirm it. This has the potential to intervene into any sense of responsibility an audience has for Hoyle or the success of his performances. Again, Hoyle confronts his audience with an unclear overlap of affirmation, justification and responsibility. However, despite this occasional sense of ambivalence around the level of complicity we have in Hoyle's performances, there are occasions when we cannot escape our role in perpetuating shows that contain, or even rely on, (self-) destructive activities. Importantly, this is not just the case with our affirmative acts within individual performances but also in our response to the appeal to a long-term fidelity to Hoyle and his practice. This appeal is most clearly exemplified in the structuring of some of his performances into blocks of weekly shows. For example, the positioning of *Lauren Harries Sober* as a kind of sequel, with a titular in-joke for those who were present at *Antiques Roadshow*, implies a reward for

those committed to returning to Hoyle and his performances. Such commitment is, in turn, an act of affirmation.

A continued return to Hoyle's shows implies a statement of 'yes, keep going'. This is important in a practice that persistently embraces the risk of mayhem and mishap, resulting not only in the provision of guiltily titillating spectacles, but also occasionally falling into potentially tedious displays of awkward mishaps and trite unpleasantness. Such moments have ranged from Hoyle, in his previous incarnation as 'The Divine David', 'injecting mysterious substances onstage' (Hoyle 2011) to an alcohol-influenced demonstration of 'less-than-perfect race politics' (Butt 2013: 50). My aim in addressing these activities is not to moralize on Hoyle's performances or audience reactions to them, nor to presume what makes a healthy or destructive activity for Hoyle. Instead, I argue that there are onstage moments (e.g. injecting 'unknown substances') that confront audiences with an immanent and complex sense of responsibility in relation to their decision to act affirmatively when responding. This sense of uneasiness around affirmation connects with the neologism 'response-ability'. The term appears at the end of Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006: 185–6). Lehmann refers to the 'mutual implication of actors and spectators in the theatrical production of images' (p. 186, emphasis in original). Rachel Zerihan develops the term in accordance with her discussion of the intimate encounters of performances involving one performer and one participant/audience member (2009). For her, it is a committed response in a format in which 'questions around one's individual role in the performance's agency – in terms of cultural politics, erotic encounters, sacred moments, therapeutic interactions and risky opportunities – are brought to the foreground' (p. 3). In my reading of Hoyle's practice it refers, firstly, to the way he confronts his audience with their conflicted responsibilities in perpetuating, on the one hand, potentially destructive words and actions, and, on the other, a hysterically

funny and affirmative individual show and ongoing performance practice. Hoyle has the potential to immerse audiences in uneasiness about their ability to respond appropriately both in their role as ethical subjects and as audience members contributing to the success of a show. In his interview with Hoyle, author Rupert Smith captures this conflicted sense of responsibility in relation to acting affirmatively in response to moments that are simultaneously upsetting and funny:

I sometimes think that your work must be an intolerable burden. Because you go out onto that stage and you do things that make me feel, as a friend of yours, quite upset sometimes, even though I'm laughing so much that my face hurts. But I've actually seen you do things that really upset me. (Hoyle 2011)

By confronting audiences with the predicaments inherent in acts of affirmation (e.g. laughing while finding something upsetting), the social space that Hoyle commands emerges as a microcosm of our lives outside of it. Across both we are burdened by the 'intolerable burden' of others, thus undermining our ability to affirm fully the projects we involve ourselves in.

The unwelcome nature of this burden links to what R. Jay Wallace describes as a 'bourgeois predicament', in which affirmation of certain projects that we have come to build our lives around 'arguably commits us to affirming the social inequalities that are their historical and contemporary conditions, even though we continue to view those inequalities as objectively lamentable' (2013:7). Wallace gives the example of 'academic pursuits that are carried out in the context of elite research universities, which would not be possible in a social world that did not involve massive deprivation and inequality in human life prospects' (p. 7). Hoyle's acerbic pedagogy is played out against the narcissistic, complacent and consumerist 'projects' that are, for Hoyle, affirmed through some elements of contemporary gay culture. Hoyle's position in the face of such projects is captured in his rants against 'the homogenized gay world, which doesn't like to acknowledge that some

gay people are homeless and penniless, and which likes to pretend that collectively we don't have any responsibility for anybody' (quoted in Johnson 2007: 12). His attacks are not only targeted towards conservative and consumerist elements in 'gay culture'. For example, as a dad I have felt excessively self-conscious when hearing Hoyle's definitive and graphic disapproval of human reproduction. At various performances I have sat with my rucksack full of nappies and rusk crumbs while Hoyle raged against the idea of having children when there are so many wars that need to be stopped. I was brutally reminded of the intensely inward-looking duties of the parenthood 'project' that has become central to my life and its potential to perpetuate an oppressive heteronormative ideal and divert attention away from my responsibilities in overcoming global inequality and violence. Thus I experienced Hoyle's foregrounding of what Wallace describes as the 'affirmation dynamic', which 'leads to a rift between ourselves and the larger world in which we live, one that frustrates our ambition to live lives that are worthy of unconditional affirmation' (p. 7). Whether these projects involve immersing ourselves in hilarity on an evening out, or building lifelong responsibilities, lifestyles, careers and other attachments that affirm our subjectivity, Hoyle productively infects such affirmation with a sense of response-ability.

CONCLUSION

Hoyle's acts and words of affirmation are performed with Butt's 'camp and queer sincerity' (2013:44) and an unsteady didacticism that embraces fragility and contradiction. This does not take away from the commitment Hoyle makes to the causes he affirms, as demonstrated in his willingness to risk an unpopularity that might compromise his livelihood as a performer. Instead it offers up the pleasures and productivity of affirmation while refusing to ignore the potential exclusivity and ignorance it relies on. Also, despite his inclusive, irreverent and infectious performance of unwavering

affirmation, the actual causes that Hoyle affirms are potentially as uncontainable as Butt suggests Hoyle is. The most easily graspable, but by no means definitive elements of this multifaceted, precariously layered accumulation of causes, are a rampant and addictive drive towards living experientially (Hoyle, 2011)², an ecstatic celebration of the marginalized and the excluded and a ceaseless rage against the oppressively normative and the damagingly judgemental. However, recklessly pursuing new experiences does not always support the attentive care for others that Hoyle's other causes require. On top of this, as exemplified above, is the commitment to the elusive and unfixed cause of being 'real', which has the potential to undermine spontaneously any other ideal that Hoyle's projects aim to affirm. *Lauren Harries Sober* is a prime example of how Hoyle embraces the disorder that occurs when multiple causes seem to vie for his affirmation. The presence of Harries herself contributed to the tension and trouble of this disorder, due to her position both as a marginalized identity at the receiving end of brutal judgements and, for Hoyle, as an individual willing to judge others dismissively from a perceived position of superiority. A peculiar affirmation emerges from these vying pursuits of 'realness', care and anti-judgementalism. Ultimately, this is an affirmation of the ambiguities, fragments and contradictions that arise through the impossibility of any project or cause to be totally stable and uncompromised. In my case, this means that even though I experienced discomfort when acting affirmatively (laughing, clapping, nodding) in response to Hoyle's vicious attacks on reproduction, the position of contradiction and even betrayal that I found myself in felt accommodated. Ultimately, like Wallace (2013), Hoyle displays a clear belief in the necessity of affirming projects that sustain our livelihoods. However, Hoyle also manages to demonstrate how a rigorous attention to, and a willingness to confront, the flaws, exclusivities, contradictions and fragility of the causes our lives affirm need not affect the vigour and pleasure we put into affirming them.

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² 'Curiosity' and a desire to living 'experientially' are offered by Hoyle as an answer to Rupert Smith's question 'Why inject mysterious substances onstage?' (2013).