

# CLASS

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM



BY RHIANNON WHITE



*'Whose dance is this?'*

---

MAGGIE ATKINSON,  
FORMER CHILDREN'S  
COMMISSIONER FOR  
ENGLAND (2010-15)



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Lastly I would like to thank my mum who, against all odds continues to flourish. She taught me the beauty of humanity and how to stand up to injustice.

This research is dedicated to my late uncle Mike, a true working class Welsh man who spent his last years teaching me to hold history dear.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rhiannon is co-founder and co-artistic director of Common Wealth, an award-winning site specific theatre company.

For Common Wealth directing, credits include We're Still Here (National Theatre Wales) The People's Platform (Representing Communities/ National Theatre Wales) The Deal Versus The People (West Yorkshire Playhouse), Our Glass House (Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award.)

Associate director credits include; No Guts, No Heart, No Glory (Scotsman Fringe First Award / Live From TVC) with BBC4.

As a freelancer Rhiannon has collaborated and made work with National Theatre Wales, National Theatre (UK), Experimentica Festival, Sherman Cymru, Being a Man Festival (Southbank Centre) & Circus 2 Palestine. Rhiannon was recipient of a Cultural Clore Fellowship in 2016 and a Creative Wales Award 2017. She is currently a panel member for the Independent Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in England.



## ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Jon Pountney is an artist who uses drawing, film and primarily photography to look at themes around the passage of time, and the devices we use to understand it. On a deeper level than that, any image uses story-telling, and Pountney uses long-form projects to explore nostalgia, community and senses of place.

'I first picked up a 'real' camera in 1995, a present for my 17th birthday from my Nan. From this moment I began my creative journey as a photographer and artist, exploring photography, painting and drawing at college and university.

Since leaving education, I have worked on a series of self-initiated and collaborative projects, which have ranged from a residency in a castle to a photography documentary commissioned and shown by the BBC.

My work is the result of years of seeing and thinking about photography and my place within it as an artist.

My aesthetic as a photographer is very simple and straightforward: try to capture interesting places and moments in time and share with others. Not merely a spectator, I am most often a member of the communities who form my practice. I am driven by storytelling through imagery, in still or moving image, and I believe my familiarity with my subjects helps to vitalise the work by lending credibility and an empathetic interpretation.'



## ABOUT

*CLASS the elephant in the room* was researched, written and performed as part of my Arts Council Wales supported Clore Fellowship (2015 – 2016) and was funded by the Arts Humanities and Research Council.

My academic supervisor for the project was Eva Elliott from Cardiff University School of Social Sciences.

The purpose of *CLASS The Elephant in the room* is to investigate the inherent social conditions that exist in the creative industries today; social conditions such as social class and geographic location that can influence and determine a career in the arts. It will pay attention to the contradictions that play out where class is considered, and how these contradictions continue to reproduce and reinforce class divisions.

It will be an auto-ethnographic study that draws from my own personal experience and combines it with interviews with others who share a similar position. It provides a personal testimony on working in a sector that is dominated by white, middle-class males.

This report will be first and foremost delivered as a live performance debate that provides a resource for theatres, artists and institutions to use if they would like to form their own discussions around the themes of diversity and class.

The first performance showcased as part of the Experimentica Festival 2017. It was re-commissioned and appeared again in November as part of Cardiff University's contribution at the ESRC Festival of Social Sciences.



## METHODOLOGY



### COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS

I began my research by holding a number of workshops and group interviews in working class communities with a focus on identity, class and art. I chose two areas: St. Mellons, an outer-city council estate, and Merthyr Tydfil, a post-industrial town in the South Wales Valleys. I was interested in these two places because they have a number of things in common:

- 1) There is low or no engagement with the substituted arts.
- 2) They have been stigmatised by misleading narratives from the press, politicians and the media.
- 3) They continue to be stigmatised as working class communities.

In each of these places I chose to work with different participants, being responsive to location and the culture of each place.

**St Mellons** I delivered a workshop with a local girls group at the youth centre. These girls had little or no access to the arts.

**Merthyr Tydfil** I delivered a drama workshop to 20 performing arts students at Merthyr. They had a deep understanding of the arts and are keen to pursue creative careers in the future.

### NATIONAL INTERVIEWS

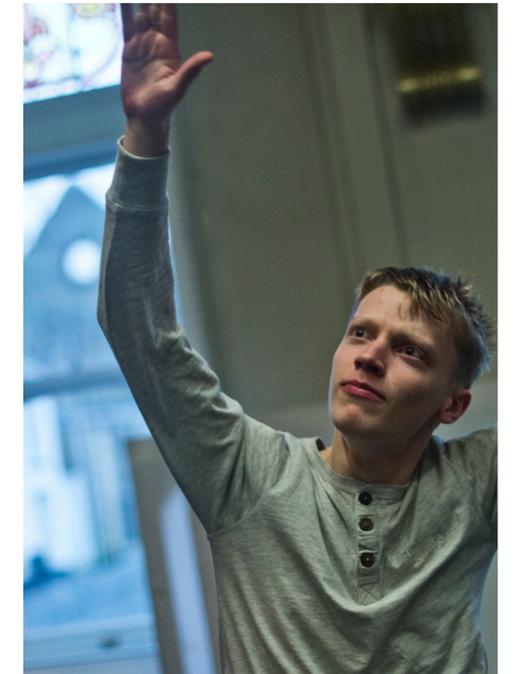
There have been numerous recent reports documenting the inequalities within the creative sector. These reports have exposed that in the UK's fastest growing industry there are still barriers to poor people. In 2015 the Warwick report publically reported that diversity had plummeted in the sector. Vikki Heywood, chair of the Commission, identified that

*"There are barriers and inequalities in Britain today that prevent [creativity] from being a universal human right. This is bad for business and bad for society." A recent study at Goldsmiths University found that only 18% of Britain's cultural workforce is born to parents with working-class jobs. Whilst these findings are impactful and have shaped and informed some organisations, it still feels as if other social and economic factors are forcing a societal drift towards privilege and exclusion."*

(Heywood, 2015)

My interest in the exclusionary nature of the sector has led me to investigate the experiences of both current and former workers in this industry. I feel that these voices were sometimes missing and for us to make sense of the current situation we should pay attention to those who work inside it.

I sourced twenty interviews from a range of professionals and non-professionals – I interviewed actors, directors, choreographers, grime artists, MPs, producers, arts council officers and people who have participated in cultural activities. I wanted to capture the feeling of class within the sector, and then I subsequently used this material to create a performance based on real experience. These testimonies have been used as a starting point to create a response both written and performative. The interviews will be used in a later section of this report as a way of punctuating thoughts and ideas – I have anonymized the authors but identify them with their roles as a way of distinguishing how they're positioned in this context.



# CLASS THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

THE PERFORMANCE

This performance was the culmination of my research. It explored the possibilities of what needs to change in an industry that distances itself from working class people: culturally, socially and economically.

Performed by four actors and co-created with visual artist Gareth Chambers, we created a piece that responded to class from a personal perspective as well as theoretical perspective, grounded in the voices of those that I had interviewed. Using the theatrical technique of *verbatim*, the actors channeled the people I had interviewed by listening to their voices through headphones and speaking it back to the audience word for word. This technique is an interesting one and being aware of the power to edit and misconstrue stories, we kept the material unedited. Stories are powerful and we were all too aware of the responsibility that is in our hands as editors.

We then invited the audience to join us in a debate about the themes we had raised. We focused the debate around four topics:

**CHANGE** If you think there is some work to be done, that there is some change that needs to happen, what is that change? And how does it come about?

**STRUCTURE** The arts sector has become more stratified, despite the increasing ground swell of ideas and action on the issue of diversity.

**WORKING CLASS ARTIST** Do you want to force your way into the system or is the system part of the problem?

**DIVERSITY** Who does the art sector include and exclude?

The performance was an important part of the process, reaching beyond the written report to a wider and diverse audience.





## WORKSHOPS ST MELLONS

St Mellons is a large housing estate South East of Cardiff. Partnered with Trowbridge, the bordering estate, this district has a population of 14,801 making it the 4th most populated area in Cardiff.

Its main areas consist of a Tesco shopping complex, and a boarded-up retail unit that was once a Hyper Value and Kwik Save. Within the shopping complex a limited number of small businesses, a community centre and a library.

In 1993 St Mellons gained a degree of unfortunate notoriety. John Redwood (the Welsh Secretary of State at the time) came to the estate and subsequently released a damning report. A Guardian article documented (Toynbee, P 2013) him brandishing St Mellons as a den of female vice.

St Mellons was a place, Redwood said, where there was “no presumption in favour of creating a loving family background”. He said that “the assumption is that the illegitimate child is a passport to a council flat”. The single mother is “married to the state”. If the father cannot be found, grandparents should be made to pay or adoption be considered. The welfare state was offering “incentives to entice young women to become mothers before their time”.

This was his story of St Mellons: mine of course was very different.

I grew up in St Mellons and my family still live there today. We were actually one of the first families to live on the estate when it was first built. My mum so proud of obtaining a [council] house for the family that she would constantly affirm to us how lucky we were.

I grew up in a single-parent family. My mother worked three jobs to keep food on the table and clothes on our backs. She never saw us go without but of course raising three children in a single-parent family was a constant struggle for her. My brother left school without GCSEs and at 16 was signed up to the navy and sent to Bosnia. My sister worked abroad.

We were fortunate to have a library on our estate, a place of sanctuary, somewhere for us to go, something we could do without the need for money. I spent most of my time in the library getting lost in books. It was these years that taught me how important culture is to communities such as mine.

The street we lived in was full of kids. My childhood was spent playing games in the street, old games that got handed down and new ones we made up ourselves. My street was designed for playing in, gardens to hide in, lampposts, gullies and subways surrounded my house – it was perfect for us.



We had space to play and we had a community around us that gave us freedom to do just that. Storytelling was a massive part of our playing. I used to dress kids up and put on plays in my garden, inviting parents to come and watch. Culture and art were part of our everyday.

The impact of Redwood's legacy was huge. The story that Redwood told people about us was hard to shake off.

## ST MELLONS YOUTH CENTRE WORKSHOP

The workshop takes place in St Mellons youth centre where I used to go as a kid. It is opposite the Tesco in the heart of the estate, and manned by two youth workers employed by Cardiff Council. I'm surprised that nothing has changed in the 18 years since I was last here. The furniture, the walls, the posters are all the same.

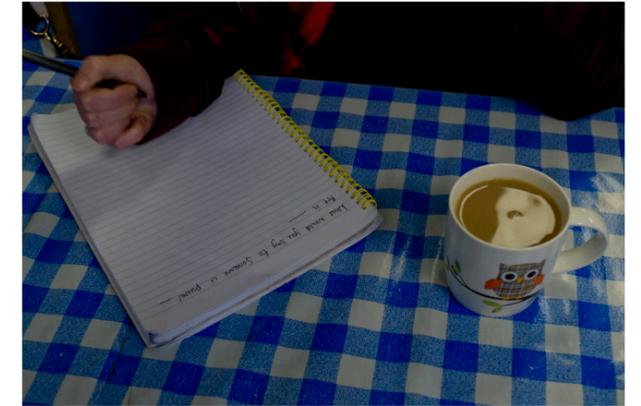
I meet with a group of girls in the small TV room. The walls are painted social-worker yellow. there are bars on the windows and everything in the room looks damaged or broken. The girls are restless but they sit with me. Between the distractions we talk about life in St Mellons and what class means to them.

They talk about what they do with their time, how they're treated by the police, the school and what they'd like to do if they get the chance. One says she wants to be an archaeologist another a make-up artist.

She shows me pictures on her phone of make-up she has done on her friends they tell me they tell me how those careers feel out of reach. For them there's nowhere to go and there's nothing to do.

I ask them if they've ever been to a theatre: they haven't, but they would if they could afford it. if there was something good on. No one's invited them though.

It feels inappropriate to record as it feels intrusive, so I don't.



Outside we meet more young people. We talk about art and the story of their engagement with the arts is largely similar. They would like to be more involved, maybe go and see something but they don't know where to go and how to get there. I ask them who they think art is for and what they think art is. It's for Boris Johnson they say. I laugh. It sums it up.

I arrange to re-visit the centre the following week to have a session with the girls to see what we could do together. The following week I return but the girls are not there. I wait but the staff at the centre are unaware of the schedule. The key contact doesn't return my calls. I find out from another worker that she's off sick because of stress.

This is the first set of contradictions that I have found. A group of young people excluded from participating in creativity – lack of provision, support and engagement - has left these young people with the bare bones of a community centre and not much else.



## MERTHYR TYDFIL

Merthyr Tydfil is a large post-industrial town in the south Wales Valleys. Once the largest town in Wales, today it is Wales's fourth largest town by population. Merthyr has a radical socialist history: it's the place where Keir Hardie<sup>1</sup> was first elected, where the Socialist red flag was raised and the working class uprising saw the death of Dic Penderyn<sup>2</sup>, Wales's working class martyr.

In more recent years, Merthyr has endured much negative publicity, with programmes such as Channel 4's *Skint* portraying negative representations of the town's inhabitants as benefit cheats and drug addicts.

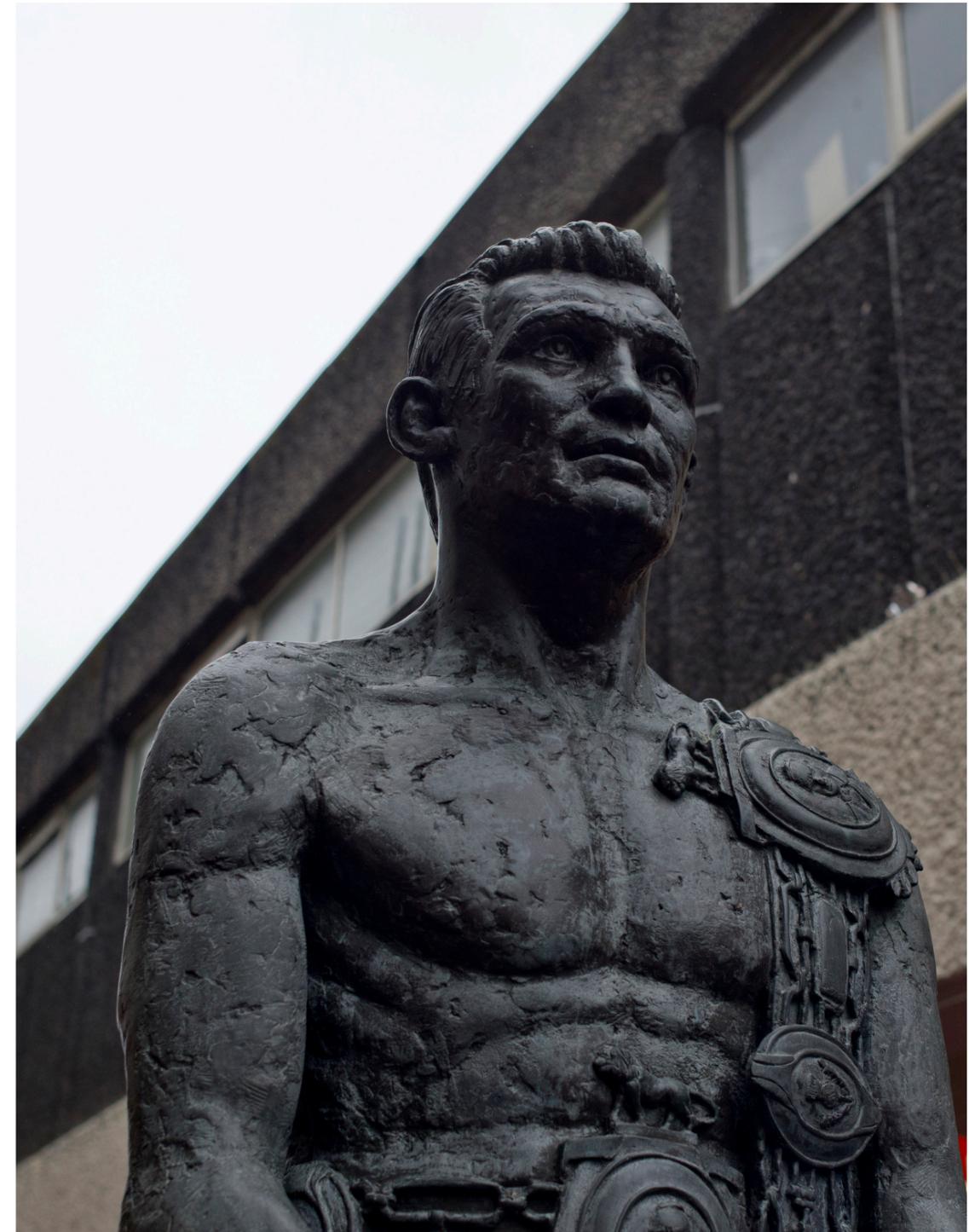
My experience of Merthyr has been a different story. Having worked in the area for the past five years I have watched as the community has come together to create shows, attend workshops and take care of each other. The number of recent projects that have celebrated the strength of this community are too numerous to mention here.

One actor I've worked with expressed how few opportunities existed in Merthyr before an outside institution came and created a piece that involved local people.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1900, Hardie organised a meeting of various trade unions and socialist groups and they agreed to form a Labour Representation Committee and so the Labour Party was born. Later that same year Hardie in the South Wales Valleys, which he would represent for the remainder of his life. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keir\\_Hardie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keir_Hardie)

<sup>2</sup> Dic Penderyn took part in the Merthyr Rising in 1831, a Welsh working class martyr. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dic\\_Penderyn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dic_Penderyn)





*'Merthyr's got a lot of history with the boxers and the iron works. Before I got involved with ..... I didn't know anything about the arts in Merthyr because it was never shown to us. Little murals on the walls show us what Merthyr was like years ago like the steam engine and the iron works. The only arts I knew about were Joseph Parry that was the most I ever knew, years ago'*

*"My feeling would be that we're working for the community and we're there to help. I would cover stories that are relevant to the people in that community. In Merthyr there's a lot of unemployment and sickness so I'd like to do plays that bring these into the foreground so we don't have to just live on what the telly says. Most of the time the telly makes us out to be crap. Give us a chance."*

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RHIANNON POPP  
ACTRESS & LOCAL RESIDENT

The workshop is with drama students at Merthyr College it's in the former town hall, recently restored after being a nightclub. The building is beautiful, grand. It's in this building Keir Hardie would have shaped his Labour manifesto.

I have a class of 20 students from Merthyr and the surrounding areas, they have all have a keen interest in theatre and the arts, and are thus very enthusiastic about this session. We talk about social class, what it means, what they think and feel about it and if it impacts on their lives. We question the role of theatre and the arts, and create manifestos of how they would like to take the arts forward into the future.

In groups, they discussed:

- What is class?**
- What does the term 'working class' mean?**
- What strength can we learn from the working classes?**
- What commonalities do people share across class?**

Further activities that the students took part in were:  
As individuals create 5 questions you would ask yourself

- 5 questions you would ask yourself about class**
- 5 questions that occupy your life**
- 5 questions you would ask yourself**
- 5 questions you would ask society**

Take a piece of paper and use these prompts to finish off the sentence

- I make art because...**
- Art should be...**

In small groups write

**A manifesto for the future of the arts.**





## CLASS

Who defines class?  
 Why do we have to have class?  
 Do we need to be divided?  
 Why aren't we equal?  
 Why am I not accepted?  
 Does class tell us who we are?  
 Why are the lower classes less important?

## WORKING CLASS

Pushing through everything  
 Working for what they have  
 Community  
 Team work  
 They do the jobs others don't want to  
 They survive  
  
 I make art because it's a way to express myself  
 I make art because it inspires me to question my inner thoughts and feelings  
 I make art because it inspires me and makes me happy  
 I make art because it makes me part of a collective  
 I make art because it helps me escape from the outside world and I can be anyone  
 I make art because I want others to make art

*"If you look at the general history of the substituted arts in this country it's really the domain of the middle classes, really, male and female. It is the domain, the territory owned by the middle classes in this country and it keeps them in jobs, gives them mortgages, and gives them a career. Have you noticed the way that arts are structured? It's hierarchal structure – you entered arts because you wanted to do it, same as me. I never thought the arts was a career, I thought it was a mode of expression not necessarily a way to pay off your mortgage.*

*The way I usually put it is they've colonised the arts. The arts have mostly been a bourgeoisie practise – but – put it this way during the British Empire the sons and daughters of the middle classes would become vicars, missionaries or officers in the British army like in places like India, Africa – missionaries. Now the useless sons and daughters of the middle classes go into the arts and make a living. That's the arts in this country."*

HASSAN MAHAMDALLIE  
 PLAYWRIGHT & ARTS CONSULTANT

# REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH AND PERFORMANCE

My research has led me to focus on three specific areas that I think are the most pressing when talking about art and class.

I have broken my reflection into three categories:

## CLASS, CULTURE and EDUCATION

### THE CONTEXT OF CLASS

Working Class, Middle Class, Upper Class are the most common terms used to distinguish social class. The terms first appeared in nineteenth century. During the industrial revolution, they were used to define the social differences between the workers and the owners. We still use these definitions today although the terms feel less relevant as the divides become more complex and murky. What is clear is that although we're not working in Victorian workhouses today, significant social differences are still playing out in our public affairs, determining what the future holds for us and how the world sees us.

It has been argued by Savage (Savage 2015) that class is fundamentally being remade, that we are moving away from middle class, working class differences and more towards a new class order, one which is more hierarchal in differentiating the top (1% elites) from the bottom (what he calls the precariat, those who struggle to get by on a daily basis). The upper class sit within a league of their own, often ignored and left to their own devices.

Savage says that 'Class is fundamentally tied up with inequality. But not all economic inequalities are about class. What allows inequalities to crystallise into class is when advantages endure over time in a way which extends beyond any specific transaction. Social classes, we contend, are fundamentally associated with the stored historical baggage and the accumulation of advantages over time.' (Savage, 2015, p579)

Further in his book, Savage discusses the talks about the symbolic power of class and the way that shame and stigma are tied up with forms of domination as defined by the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu<sup>3</sup>. For Bourdieu, class is about people who feel 'entitled' and people who feel 'dominated'.

Class is fundamentally tied up with inequality. Class isn't complex; it festers and grows with capitalism, pushing apart those who are identifiably born with privilege and those who are not. In his book *Change the World without taking power: The meaning of revolution today*, John Holloway captures the horror of *Capitalism and its impact on the World* (Holloway, 2010),

*"Capitalism is nastier, more violent, more unjust, more destructive... the existence of Capitalism implies a dynamic of development which attacks us constantly, subjecting our lives more directly to money, creat-*

*ing more and more poverty, more and more inequality, more and more families"* (Holloway, 2010)

Economic and political power is in the hands of the elites whose only goal is to make money, which means the life of anyone else means very little to them and this makes the system unequal at its core. Capitalism is dependent on inequality – it thrives off depriving the vast majority of people from a decent standard of life. Under capitalism power is not distributed equally, it's a hierarchy where those at the top hire and fire, choose who gets the jobs and who gets the power. Since they're the ones that benefit from the system, why should and would they encourage changes within it?

The creative industries exist within that elite hierarchy, determined and ruled by those who come from money who get to decide what the notion of art is, what value is and who gets to make it. They get to choose.

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<sup>3</sup>In <http://routledgesoc.com/category/profile-tags/cultural-capital>

*“I’d consider myself working class.”*

————— HASSAN MAHAMDALLIE  
PLAYWRIGHT & ARTS CONSULTANT

*“Just because we’re working class doesn’t mean that we don’t have an opinion or ideas or cannot do. We do have talent, we’ve got lots of talent and if there’s no one there to fetch it out of us then it’s just going to be hidden for the rest of our lives.”*

————— RHIANNON POPP  
ACTRESS

*“In this country the class system is so entrenched that the idea of social climbing is a capitalist’s myth.”*

————— ACTOR & MUSICIAN  
LONDON

*“I can meet a graduate fresh out of uni here on an internship, unpaid internships. We can’t afford to do that, we’re not allowed because even if your drawing a JSA you’ve got to be looking for jobs and that. To get on in life you need money and even if you had a windfall they’d still smell the class on you a mile off. I could get four PHD’s and shit and they’d still look and talk to me like I was scum. That’s just the way it is.”*

————— ACTOR, LONDON

*“I don’t want to be middle class. I just want to be an equal human being”*

————— ACTOR, LONDON

I was drawn to investigate social class after my year on the Clore Leadership Programme. During my time at Clore I was exposed to the best education, the best networks and the best resources. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

I was told that authenticity is key to great leadership. I was continuously reminded to be proud of who I was and where I came from, this wasn’t hard for me because that’s something I was brought up to believe. However brilliant it was I couldn’t shake the one reoccurring feeling I had of inadequacy. It would eat me up, little worms that reminded me that I didn’t have the same education as some of my peers and definitely not of some of the speakers that came to speak to us. Sometimes I would just sit and listen, I didn’t want to speak for fear of being exposed (or misunderstood).

In her article on affective history, working-class communities and self-determination, the sociologist Valerie Watkin writes:

“I try to remember the feeling of not speaking. It is shame – shame that I have nothing clever to say, but also rage – rage because what I want to say doesn’t fit and doesn’t make sense in the terms of that they are using, but also fear about the consequences of saying what I think for the possibility of my staying in this space. My experience of working class life is so different from what they’re saying.”

This state that Walkerdine talks about echoes my experience. Regardless of education, experience and age, this uncomfortable feeling of class reverberates inside us. As a working class artist, I have always been aware of my class – from the way I look, sound and hold myself to the work that I make. In my experience, class in the creative sector has long been the elephant in the room, often deemed as secondary and

difficult to address.

The effect of class has left me unsure of how to position myself in relation to those who are more entitled. This has led me to question the very nature of where I belong in the arts world.

The first time I became aware of my class was at a youth theatre in Cardiff. I managed to get into the theatre at a discounted rate because my mum was on benefits.

I’d never been to the theatre before and I never knew that the youth theatre even existed. It was like someone had given me backstage access to a secret that only special people knew of – I soon realised that those special people were special because they had money.

At the youth theatre I became aware of my identity and what it meant to be from a council estate – I experienced imposter syndrome and it stuck to me hard. At the theatre I felt ashamed that I wasn’t going on holiday, or that I had to get two buses to get there because no one could drive. I convinced myself that if I was going to be serious about succeeding in the arts world that I had to pretend to be more like them, to be better. I couldn’t do that being the person I was. This was my tension, carrying a deep pride of who I was and where I come from and falling in love with an industry that was twisted with privilege and wealth.

## CULTURE

My journey into the arts has not been straight forward, and I'm thankful for that, I never entered into theatre because I believed I could get a job. The motivation was in discovering that theatre was a form of expression.

I was both lucky to be the first one in my family to go to university, and that it was in the heyday of loans, overdrafts and smaller tuition fees. At university I soon learnt that again there was a serious lack of people from my background, and if the contemporary artists of the future are mainly defined by those that get degrees then what art are they making? And who are they making it for?

In most of my twenties I spent working in theatres and art centres. I found it inspiring to be in that world watching shows, exhibitions and cinema. I loved how transient it felt and every time a new show arrived at the theatre it felt like a gift. At all these venues I did notice first, how empty they could be and, secondly, how most of the time there was only a certain type of person attending.

It became clear that the theatre managers that I was working for, most often than not, had come from public school backgrounds, and it felt like anything seen as being from local communities was considered to be of low value, underfunded, little more than a tick box exercise.

I was content working in theatres, cafes, bars and making work on my own terms in my spare time. We were told that people like us don't go to university let alone get jobs in the arts.

Making theatre became activism, it was a practise outside the status quo. I began to meet regularly with a group of friends. We made plays, finding big empty building where we could make things happen.

It was a magic time. We were fearless. It felt like we could do anything. Taking risks was essential for us to feel fearless. We didn't have financial backing, we didn't have family we could rely on but what we did have is a jobseekers and plenty of support off each other.

This could never happen today because, first, it is illegal to squat and, secondly, you cannot sign on and be either an artist or a volunteer at the same time. With such a strong focus on making arts more diverse, inclusive and accessible, it feels ironic that the pathways that enabled working class artists to work in the sector have been removed and replaced with more institutionalised access routes, or no access routes at all. Moreover, as a working class person, you confront another set of complications and obstacles when you take advantage of the opportunities that are made available.

If we are not creating genuine pathways for artists to develop then what does the future of art look like? What are we missing out on?

It was Raymond Williams, who in 1959, coined that phrase culture is ordinary against an exclusionary notion of culture that is only meaningful to a highly educated minority.

As Williams suggests, culture is indeed part of our everyday whether you live in Merthyr or Kensington. Where the problem lies, is of course, in the notion of taste and what is deemed as respectable and of excellence.

We make the performance of Class: The Elephant in the room in an art centre. It was an opportunity to challenge the elephant in the room that lies inside this and other arts institutions. The question of who gets to use these buildings and feel welcome in them is one that often arises.

For one of the performers it is only his second time here. He said he feels welcome here and that in places like this he can be himself. When we leave the venue at the end of the show he witnesses an elderly women fall out of a car in the car park. He tries to help her and the woman (who did not appear to be working class) screams at him to get away. When I speak to him he is furious, upset at being judged because he is a young man in a tracksuit. In this context I question whether space is the problem or if it is the people who inhabit it that become the barrier. With the segregation of space we mourn the loss of human interaction and this is essential for a creative, collaborative society.

Of course the arts have always been part of working class communities. The 80s gave birth to incredible theatre companies such as John McGrath's 7:84<sup>4</sup> and the film work of Ken Loach<sup>5</sup> created a movement of radical working class theatre. And of course that isn't touching the surface of culture in these communities. In places like St Mellons and Merthyr we see the rise of grime, a radical poetry network, panto and DIY theatre movements that take place daily.

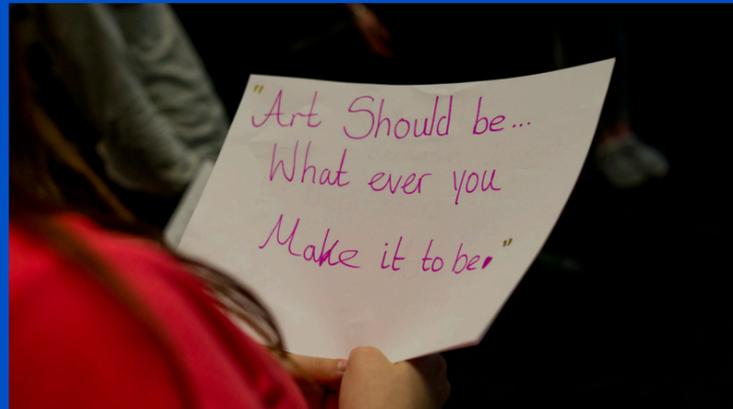
However strong this movement, it has always, by the powers that 'be' been seen as a inferior form of expression. Established ideas of what art is, defined by elites, positions such cultural expressions as inferior - not real art.

Not only has 'community arts' received a battering from those tastemakers but the platforms to share and come together have also been removed over the years, leaving communities without space and resource to come together. We have seen closures and cuts to institutes, social clubs, miners' halls, youth clubs, nightclubs, libraries, creative subjects in schools and alongside the privitisation of public space (to name a few).

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<sup>4</sup> A touring working class socialist theatre that toured the UK from 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Ken Loach a film director that captures the working class story and struggle <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0516360/>



*“Art is an invented category isn’t it. What you and I are talking about is human expression and that is within everyone. The notion of the structure of the arts world is a different question all together. It’s part of the human condition to try and communicate to each other. Everyone does that whether it’s down the pub or whatever. Telling stories. Human expression that then falls into the realm of creativity which may enter the arts world. The arts world is a social construct. It’s not the only arena where creative expression takes place.*

*The stuff that comes off the streets, like hip-hop culture are truly global movements. Jazz in the 1920s truly global creative moments appropriated by big business. But, I’m sorry opera has never been a global movement has it? That’s where a lot of subsidies go; National theatre, opera. That’s where it goes and then we fight for the rest.”*

—————  
HASSAN MAHAMDALLIE  
PLAYWRIGHT AND ARTS CONSULTANT

*“I wasn’t good at art. I remember not being good at things like that but I remember particularly wanting to win this competition, I remember putting my mind to it and just wanting to win. All I cared about was winning. It was to draw something, I can’t remember what it was. No one really thought I would take it because I wasn’t one of the smart kids and I wasn’t dumb either but when the head teacher called me down I thought it was for something bad. Everyone was shocked when I won because I was one of the bad kids. I was bad in primary school. I fell in love with wanting to be the best, wow man, I remember coming back to the class, head held high – it was something to be proud of wasn’t it. My mum was gassed as well, she was happy”.*

————— RHIANNON POPP, ACTOR

*“Music saved me. I think music saved me. I 100% believe that music saved me. Music saved me because it’s allowed me to take a step out of the system that’s been set up for me and say yo like, this is the world man and it’s in your hands.”*

———— GRIME ARTIST, LONDON

*“Exhilarating. Invigorating. It opened my mind to new aspects to the world that I didn’t know about and I’ve gently learnt along the way. Like, I didn’t think I could be a writer and write poems and my own stories. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do; it’s brought that out of me. I think this is what happens it transforms you from thinking it’s just college and university students in the art world and it’s not it’s normal people like me and you – we can be actors.”*

———— RHIANNON POPP, ACTRESS

Growing up on an estate was the perfect breeding ground for creativity. We had unlimited resources of space in which to play, and kids to play with. Art was part of our everyday.

I used to dress the kids up on my street and put on plays for the parents in my garden. I made shows because a) we were bored and wanted to make things up, have fun b) because the reality of our lives was harsh, unpredictable and complicated so we created a reality beyond our circumstances so we could just be kids. It was a strategy of escapism, one that kept our spirits high and our minds creative.

My dream was to be an actor, I was serious about it and the teachers at school saw that talent in me. Where I grew up there was no theatre or theatre club. Neither was there information about the theaters, art centres and programmes that already existed. There was a youth club, a Tesco, a pub and Subway. Opportunities rarely came and when they did it created a level of suspicion. We wanted to know why they were in our street and what they wanted from us.

As most of the working class artists I have spoken to the library became a sanctuary, a place where I could escape to when things got tough at home. It was here that I immersed myself in Orwell, Dickens and Wilde. It was these formative years that taught me how important libraries and culture is to a community like mine.

A contradiction that there's a drive for a society where culture is for everyone when we're at a point where we're losing libraries - the very places where, for many, the creative journey begins.



## EDUCATION

It is evident that the education system is symbolic and reinforces class divisions and privilege. Fewer institutions symbolise the gross inequality in the UK more than Britain's top 10 independent private schools. Former pupils at these schools dominate our most powerful jobs in politics, finance, and not surprisingly, the creative sector (theatre, TV, art).

In a Guardian article (Beaumont-Thomas, 2015) shone a spotlight on a survey that documented the scale of the problem with class and the arts sociologist David O'Brian highlighting the importance of privilege and ownership. He said "It is clear that creative arts are hugely important to the stories we, as a country, tell about ourselves. The government must address the potential exclusion, as a result of the educational inequalities, of voices that are not drawn from the privileged'

As it stands our education system is divided. This sense of belief that a kids from a council estate could go to university was challenged when I spoke to young people in Merthyr. Many of the young people I talked to told me that university was not for people like them.

I interviewed 19 year old Jamie from a housing estate in Merthyr who was chosen to be local political leader for his area. I was interested in what he saw in himself and how that had influenced him to get involved in leadership, I asked him;

*Have you got what it takes to be a leader?*

*He said*

*I've got what it takes but I can't because of where I come from.*

Jamie is exceptional: a youth worker and political leader. He is intelligent and unapologetic. He went to school at the local comprehensive. Jamie's response is not one that is unusual. It is a mantra that re-occurs and it seems to creep into working class communities. I wonder if what his mantra would be if things for Jamie were different? Is it just about where he lives? Or is it about class? His education?

Our education system is divided. George Waldon in his book 'The New Elites' says

"Educationally, Britain is a unique country. Nowhere else have 90 percent of those in leading positions in society been educated in schools where 90 percent of the current generation cannot attend... For all its social progress, educationally speaking, Britain is still governed by an exclusive caste, not in the old Etonian sense but simply because the leaders of society in almost every field were educated in establishments set aside for them because they were 9 talented and/or because their parents had money"

(Walden, 2000 p.193)

This division in the schooling system is perhaps the very genesis of social polarisation, It is where the divide is most explicit. The most academically successful educational establishments also nourish and sustain elite network. This supports the mantra: 'it's not what you know, it's who you know.'



*I mean the truth is education doesn't really change much it's been a complete failure. If you look at people who've had more education and the national curriculum you can see that there's been no change. It doesn't change. Inherently somehow I knew that education wasn't going to change my life chances much but sports and the arts were a definite way out.*

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HASSAN MAHAMDALLIE  
PLAYWRIGHT & ARTS CONSULTANT

*It's the truth. Statistically. There's no precedent for people. In this country the class system is so entrenched that the idea of social climbing is a capitalist myth. The system of education is not going to help you but what you do outside to educate yourself and move within the system is much more likely to help you. The idea that you're going to follow school really well and do really well is just not true because all those jobs are taken up by the people who go to private school. One, it's the social links they have. Two, it's that they get a better education.*

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ACTOR AND MUSICIAN

*But I've got nothing to show. I don't have an arts degree. But actually I know that I have ideas within me that are just as valid as someone who has a degree. Give me a toolbox and I'll make something. But I don't have the right face to have a toolbox. You're not allowed a toolbox, put the tools down. You go over there and and be an assistant. We're going to give the toolbox to someone who is white and male.*

*I wouldn't like it to be a fucking battle. I wouldn't like it to be a war because I am from a different background or place, you know.*

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ARTIST & PRODUCER, LONDON

*My thoughts on that are that I have two kids who have severe dyslexia and I've always wanted them to be on stage: singing, dancing to get on in life. I was asking about drama in school and they're not doing none. With kids with dyslexia they might not be confident academically but practically they're very clever. My children have come into the arts with me just by chance. Me and their father are surprised by how much they know.*

*I was never really big academically. I was always told you'd never make anything of your life because I wasn't good academically but I had a talent in a different way. I could express myself in that way, that talent has helped me sort repression out in quite a big way. When I'm angry I can get it out through song. As I'm saying theatre does fetch this stigma out of people so they can show that 'I can do that'. I don't have to be able to read to show how clever I am. Theatre does help and it's wrong that it's cut in schools. Everybody should have the same opportunity.*

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RHIANNON POPP  
ACTRESS



*'This is the other thing that is really dragging the whole notion of change, diversity and equality. Are actually the social mobility and the prospect of working class kids going to universities and racking up £60 grand's worth of debt. If you look at drama schools. Although they're making great efforts to diversify their student population. A lot of them aren't succeeding at all. When working class actors are on television saying 'there's a problem here' they understand it because they're part of a generation that did have some access. The gates were slightly open and they got through with going to Grammar school and obviously being very talented. They consider that doors now closing or fully closed.'*

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HASSAN MAHAMDALLIE, PLAY-  
WRIGHT & ARTS CONSULTANT



The higher your social class, the better your education and the more ingrained self-confidence seems to be. The higher you climb the more exposed to influences and networks that support. Well-educated, well-connected people know how to use their voice to their own advantage. At the other end of the social scale there is a sense of how little trust and confidence is placed in you and the place you live. If you have less money it means you have fewer options.

I know many well-educated and confident working class people. What it helps to reinforce is that class can be a controlling factor to how well you believe you can do within your circumstances. This we see highlighted in Jamie's comment 'I can't because of where I come from'. It's the capacity to believe in success that Bourdieu supports privilege people to move into positions of power. From the people that I have spoken I get the sense that even in positions of leadership and power that feeling never subsides.

If society tells you you are not good enough what chance have you got?

*"It's not the fact that if I get an a\* in English and they get an a\* in English they learn at different exam boards the employers of all the top companies know that – the people in the know, know that..... Actually a lot of those lessons are a waste of time because you don't learn to the extent that they do in the private schools. We don't have debating societies. I mean they have wood covered walls they're already preparing them to go into buildings like theatres, like parliament where they feel comfortable. When they go in there it's already their God given right because it feels like it.*

*Capitalism is funded on the myth of social mobility in this country.*

*Education doesn't help. We can argue on our chairs in the pub like yeah well I've got math's mate, yeah it didn't do nothing for us though did it. It was never going to do nothing for us, it could never do anything for us though it couldn't because there's no precedent for it."*

ARTIST & MUSICIAN

What hope do the working class have in competing for the top jobs? In 2016 the Sutton Trust<sup>6</sup> created a survey that reported that privately educated elites were enjoying a hugely disproportionate presence in the top British professions. no surprise there. It also described the acting industry as being unfavourable disproportionate, describing it as “heavily skewed towards the privileged.”

When the top jobs are occupied by a single demographic, the reality is they will shape the country to represent their interests alone. This could not be more clear in recent events that see austerity hitting those most vulnerable whilst giving tax breaks to millionaires.

With education being pivotal in class and social mobility is it the notion of private vs state schools that needs to be challenged? Is that where the journey begins to combat inequality and division?

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<sup>6</sup>[https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Leading-People\\_Feb16.pdf](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Leading-People_Feb16.pdf)



If we do not have access to learning creative subjects in schools then we are in a very despairing and desperate place. Not only will we be lacking talent development but we will be lacking a belief that working class people can do it. The level playing field doesn't exist in education, but where it might exist is in experience itself.

A college lecturer re-assures me that what we could see a ground swell of artists that are working from experience rather than education. A resurgence of underground art that creates instinctively without the need of academic institutions. The problem that she sees with academic institutions is that they create an environment where it's not ok to fail. If we don't fail then it is hard to take risks and be brave. She says 'we need to fail otherwise we give up when we think that we've already lost.

## CONCLUSION

Class divides us. We exist side by side. Parallel streets, parallel lives, people not seeing each other or seeing each other as people, magnifying difference, fuelling stigma.

Dependent on your social status you inhabit society differently. How much change you have in your pocket determines what space is yours, how much room you take up with your body and with your mind. Society is polarised.

In the arts you see the power structures that play out; the same power structures that echo through society. It keeps the elite at the top in good decent jobs with trickles of opportunities filtering in handfuls to working class people. It is they who become instrumental in reaching working class communities because it is them who can. They continue to sit at the top.

What does the industry say to a kid from a council estate? It says your not welcome, it says you have to have money, it says you have to work three times as hard as anyone else.

What can we do? Do we try to fit in with structures that don't work for us or do we create our own?

In working class communities there is strength, knowledge and creativity. It is part of the everyday. We exist in a different cultural paradigm where the elite feel alienated and out of their depth. That is our wealth but too often it's labelled by them as worthless.

What we have now is an art sector that wants to promote art for everyone and to welcome us with the promise of change.

These gestures of change merely re-packages the status quo and keeps change from happening.

- The largest beneficiary of Arts Council Wales is the Welsh National Opera who receive £4,380,654<sup>7</sup>
- In England 600 libraries have closed since 2011, in Wales one of three libraries have closed or changed hands due to budget cuts.<sup>8</sup>
- In a survey by Panic! it revealed that 77% of those in the performing arts sector were from middle class backgrounds.<sup>9</sup>
- Creativity, culture and the arts continue to be removed from the education system.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-35640338>

<sup>8</sup> <https://fullfact.org/news/how-many-public-libraries-have-closed-2011/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.createlondon.org/panic/survey/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/feb/17/arts-and-culture-systematically-removed-from-uk-education-system>

*“There almost needs to be a holding to ransom. When you’ve brought me someone who’s been on school meals all their lives, who’s never had a holiday, who’s never been anywhere. Who wouldn’t be able to walk around a gallery and you show me that you can turn them into a leader then I’ll believe that social responsibility is something you mean. We have to keep pushing, we have to keep pushing.”*

————— MAGGIE ATKINSON,  
FORMER CHILDREN’S COMMISSIONER FOR ENGLAND  
(2010-15)



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# CLASS: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

A TRANSCRIPT OF THE LIVE PERFORMANCE

*Audience enter a studio space. The stage is traverse with seating either side, the audience are facing each other. Two microphones are positioned at either end of the traverse.*

*A person dressed in a giant elephant costume is singing a karaoke version of 'Don't Look Back in Anger' by Oasis. The words are projected on the screen behind him.*

Sam: My name is Sam and I'm from Tai Bach. I just wanted to take you through a list of things, a few experiences that I've learnt from the 29 years on the earth.

I became a dad twice and I still am  
I've lost someone and I've helped someone who's lost someone  
I can drive  
I've got a mortgage, I own a house  
I can read and I can use it  
I can make new friends  
I can work right throughout the night  
I'm a steelworker  
I can entertain people I've never met before  
I can make time for myself as well as working 48 hours a week  
And keeping two kids happy  
Both my parents worked in my house and both parents  
work in my house  
I had both my parents growing up and my kids have both their parents  
I've been skint but still had fun  
I've got three Welsh kickboxing titles  
I became a husband  
I know who I can trust  
I've been in a professional play  
I've been picked up by an agency  
I chose my agency.

*Sam tries to take the elephant costume off and fails, he signals to Denim who's sat in the audience to help him remove the costume.*

Denim: Hello everyone, I'm denim.  
Thanks for coming, to be honest I didn't think we'd fill the seats.  
I wanted to share my experiences with you as well.

Played for a rugby team  
Become an uncle  
I fell in love. Became a labourer  
Been on benefits

I've been homeless  
I've slept rough  
Been hurt  
I lived independently at 16  
Grew up at a young age  
I've been told I'll never make anything of myself  
Travelled alone  
Made friends, lost friends  
Worked hard for what I've got  
I've spoken in parliament  
This is my second time in Chapter and now I'm performing in this play  
I think I should be here more often  
I think the arts is a good profession because of where it can go and that  
I like it here because everyone's themselves.

*Denim steps into the elephant costume and puts it on. Abbie helps him into it.*

Abbie: Hello everyone, I'm Abbie  
I currently work in Primark in town  
Well known for the state of the shop.

Today I'm going to give you a tutorial on how to fold pyjamas so the next time you're in Primark and you want to have a little look at the sizes, cos we all know the sizes are rubbish. Just fold them afterwards, it makes everyone's life a bit easier, you know.

*Abbie teaches the audience how to fold the pyjamas and invites a member of the audience on stage to demonstrate the technic.*

And there you go, thank you very much. Applications are online.

There's something I'd like to share with everyone as well

I've played for Cardiff City  
I was a ball girl for Arsenal  
At school I was told that I would never make it and I just finished uni with 2:1 in drama

I can speak French  
I know how to fix a bike  
I've made my own theatre  
I've done a first aid course  
I've raised money for the orphans in Africa  
I work hard under pressure  
I'm loyal, kind  
Life's tested me  
I'm from St, Mellons, some of you might know of it  
I've passed my driver's test

I was egged the other day  
I love to read.

Sam: I think for me class is a series of references, signals and shared experiences. Yeah, people talk about class as if it's an extinct thing or a thing of the past but on radio 4' if you don't listen to radio 4 then that's one reference, one signal that you've missed. Yeah, to me it's just a series of signals, references and barriers for people to breakthrough Yeah, I remember as a kid, I remember realising when I was working class when someone said something to me in school they said 'oh, your working class' and I never realised that before it was weird like, it was like I was ignorant but it was a blissful ignorance, it was nice.

Bobbi: I went to the national and saw a play called home it was about people who grew up in care. Yet the people of stage haven't been in care they say its verbatim theatre but I don't give a fuck about that. If the director and all the actors have come from LAMDA, RADA, Central and I knew they were because I googled it. They talk about people's lives and experiences without understanding what that means, they use your experiences to tell your story. In that play at least they could say they had those people's words but they didn't credit any of those people. They write down your stories and they say I was in a care home for a week I was in a council estate for two weeks.

They can never experience what it's like it doesn't matter you could be there for a year, it doesn't matter. They make the characters caricatures.

People often take that as because you want to say we're all bad. One thing they don't get their heads around is that some of the bad characters are good characters on the estate. Because we understand why the characters on the rob, we understand why he's a fucking drug dealer. You wanna say he's bad but we understand. People don't hate them it's a very difficult situation that people are in but you want the audience to think that that's a bad person.

They want to write about our lives, some people get their backs up when I say you need some agency to the story. Is your director from a working class family? Is your writer? What agency do you have to tell this story?

You need to ask yourself why are you the best person to tell this story.

Who's story is it? Why are you telling it?  
Why should I believe you?

If you can't answer any of those questions that'll make me feel like you've got any kind of legitimate agency then you need to back away from this project.

Now some people writers whatever most are middle class, they've got

their backs up on twitter and social media. They believe they've got fuck all to talk about and they want to talk about my life.

Look the history of art, performance is by you I'm saying this because want 1%

We want 1% of the real shit. Why are you getting your back up? What I'm saying isn't going to affect fuck all. This isn't going to do shit. If this inspires people. Maybe, maybe there should just be a bit more support for the artists who are telling real stories, creating something that's fucking legitimate then maybe we can have 1%

This writer said to me don't get defensive about it but isn't art about writing about other people?

I'm being extreme? I have to be extreme!  
Because you're not listening.

We have to fight to keep those positive stories. To keep those positive ones.

And the positive ones are sometimes going to be full of shit but that's something they'll never get their heads around it. Your saying you did this and that's a positive story but yeah that's life you know. My life doesn't fit your paradigm because I come from a different perspective. In your world good people do this and it's a fucking straight line.

But to be honest, all your good people are allowed to be off your tits on coke for years and do all sorts of shit that you can cover up but we're just crackheads, chavs and nutcases. We can do exactly the same thing but if you're from a different paradigm it's looked at differently.

Abbie: Even now like recently the last year or so I've realised that I've wasted the last five years of my life pretending to be someone.  
Pretending to be someone I'm not.

I don't know.

I'm very aware of how people move and how people act, look I have these friends you know during my BA that were middle class and I used to ask myself what makes them middle class, what makes them like that. I just started imitating what they'd be doing, even what time of the day they'd have their food. I was always raised to have dinner or tea, dinner was lunch and tea was dinner but you'd have tea at 6 o'clock after the weakest link on bbc 2.

So I was like well I'm going to have dinner at 8 o'clock now that's an example of pretending to be something I'm not because I thought that would make me a better person. I'd be a better person for it.

Even what type of paper you read, growing up you'd always get the Daily Mirror, you wouldn't get the Sun because the Sun was a tory paper. At the time reading this paper I just thought well this is the news, that was the actual news of the world. I remember I had a friend and I went round her house and she had the guardian on the table and I started reading it and I thought wow, what's this. At the time I found it hard to read because it was a language that was unfamiliar to me but I started to think is this what's really going on in the world. We've got Afghanistan, we've got Iraq, we've got it all going on.

That was another act. I felt like I was imitating or lip-syncing to someone else's song and through these small acts I almost transformed in a way.

I feel like I had to do it because if I didn't do it then people wouldn't take me seriously today, I think if I was still the boy with the really strong Northern accent who wore tracky bottoms all the time who ate turkey twizzlers and potato waffles I would not be the person that I am anymore. No one would have taken me seriously. Two, if I didn't start going to the library and learning to read or write, you know even know applying for arts funding or residencies or whatever, if you write in a way like I want to be an artist because I like it.

You know, that's how we were taught to write in school, like that. If I was to write like that I wouldn't even get a look in. I had to write in a way, in a way which was like the kids who went to better school's write. I had to pretend to write like them to get a look in. You have to pretend to be like them to get to places.

Bobbi: I run the Beatbox Academy here and I'm very anti-drugs. People here why, why don't you like a good old spliff but it's different. If you were walking down the street in tracksuit bottoms, I know the way you're looking at him. You're looking at him like he's a scumbag. Yeah if your smoking puff at a party with your bread and cheese it's a lot more classy and you don't have any inherent judgement on that. Also, you can afford a good old stint at rehab and come back and your strong for it, we can't afford that shit. The priory is £1000 a night, £1000 a night we can't afford that. And the way you look at us is very different, it's not the same, it's not the same. And certain industries favour people who go to certain schools, working class kids don't go to these schools they can't afford it. You have to do these unpaid internships, we can't afford that, we can't afford to be unpaid for a year or two, also we're not allowed to, if you're on JSA you have to be looking for work you're not allowed to volunteer.

So to get on in life if you haven't got money, well even if you did have a windfall they'll smell the class on you a mile off. You could have four PHD's and all that shit but they'll still look at me like I'm a piece of scum, still talk to me like I'm a piece of scum. Like, certain people, middle class

people can't see it. I don't want to be middle class, I just want to be seen as an equal human being.

END



● The Clore Leadership Programme