

For *Commit Yourself! Strategies of Staging Spectatorship in Immersive Theater*, eds. Doris Kolesch, Theresa Schütz and Sophie Nikoleit, Oxon: Routledge, forthcoming 2018.

Jen Harvie  
Queen Mary University of London  
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## **Feminism, Audience Interaction, and Performer Authority<sup>1</sup>**

Across my research, I am concerned with democracy and inequality, and how theatre and performance can both extend democracy and challenge conditions which limit equality, especially for groups disadvantaged by, for example, age, class, race, and gender. I often want to imagine that the most politically progressive performance is that which is apparently most democratic, appearing to offer the greatest extension of agency or power to its audiences. However, the correlation between audience participation and the extension of democracy is neither direct nor given, as is clear from many examples of performance discussed elsewhere in this volume and beyond,<sup>2</sup> and as I explore throughout my 2013 monograph *Fair Play – Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*.<sup>3</sup>

Given that I elsewhere criticize much immersive theatre for limiting democratic engagement, in this essay I explore how that kind of limitation could potentially function beneficially socially. I focus on performance which offers audiences some agency, but importantly also *deliberately* and explicitly withholds it, in order to preserve authority for the performers in ways that do not so much extend democratic engagement as enhance critique of the conditions that reproduce inequality. I am interested here in performances that, first, show that democracy remains, for many, a fantasy; second, direct audiences to consider how – to make a more equitable world – we have to recognize and revise the attitudes and behaviours that produce and sustain inequality; and third, explore the value in making performance that actively limits democratic engagement by being at least somewhat autocratic, in order to achieve my first two points.

I explore two recent feminist performances. The first is American performance-maker Adrienne Truscott's *Asking for It: A One-Lady Rape about Comedy Starring Her Pussy and Little Else*, first produced in 2013. The second is English performance-maker Lucy McCormick's *Triple Threat*, first produced in 2016. Both shows interrogate naturalized gender dynamics that not only disadvantage women, but are often violent to women. These shows are not what would usually be understood as immersive. That said, they do deploy many techniques of active audience engagement and interaction, and in some important ways they immerse audiences. I focus on these shows partly because of their participatory features, but not because these features seem to offer democratic hope; rather, because, in performance, these and other related features made me worried for the shows' makers; the potential for audience participation seemed to risk misogynist violence.

The power dynamics of performance and spectatorship have long raised particular problems for feminism. As film scholar Laura Mulvey influentially put it in her 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', hegemonic regimes of representation tend to pose women as 'to-be-looked-at-ness', objects of the voyeuristic and scopophilic gaze, objectified, exploited, and inappropriately sexualized (Mulvey 1975). But if conventional, fourth-wall-observing theatre may often pose the kinds of risks Mulvey identifies, participatory and immersive theatre forms potentially pose even greater problems, given their intrinsic opportunities for proximity, pursuit, and touch. I was concerned about Truscott and McCormick because both shows exposed their bodies within narratives suggesting sexual exposure, both deliberately courted audiences who might be enticed by a woman's apparent sexual exposure, and both invited interaction in small performance spaces that made some touch inevitable and groping quite possible. Furthermore, both performers present as personae who appear, in different ways, naïve or vulnerable: Truscott's persona is a beginner comedian who professes to not really know what she is doing; McCormick's persona is arrogant but appears devoid of self-awareness. Was there a risk, I worried, that Truscott and McCormick might somehow be

mistreated in performance? What would that do to them? Would it undermine these performance makers and their feminist critiques of sexism? Would it exacerbate women's inequality rather than diminish or at least critique it?

For reasons this essay goes on to explore, I did not need to worry; both women are decisively in charge of their performances and the power dynamics of controlling them; their personae may appear naïve, but Truscott and McCormick are not. They performatively articulate the kinds of ripostes that have long been provoked by Mulvey's article. These ripostes – including by Mulvey herself – variously argue that women must be able to self-represent; to choose to appear as sexy if they want to for any audiences, male, female, or other; to choose to appear naïve if they want to; and to revel in the power of such self-articulations (see, for example, Mulvey 1989). Truscott and McCormick overcome gender-biased representational regimes partly by overturning them, self-representing as having authority over their own self-representation. Truscott's *Asking for It* interrogates the apparent cultural legitimation of rape jokes and the broader spectrum of patriarchal culture of which those jokes are the tip of the iceberg. McCormick's *Triple Threat* interrogates the master narrative of the story of Jesus. Both performers interrogate female nudity as inherently sexualized-for-others.

But both shows do more than self-represent. For me, Truscott and McCormick in these shows achieve their most powerful feminist effects largely through careful management of relationships with their audiences. First, the two performers secure audiences' complicity with their interrogations of gender inequality as well as with themselves as powerful, engaging performers. They take their audiences with them in their gender critiques by cultivating audiences' on-side camaraderie. Their apparent naivety prevents them from seeming exclusive and high status. They are neither preachy nor pious. They are funny, fun, and cheekily, sometimes lewdly, comradely. This is the comparatively easy part: most audiences could agree that misogyny is bad and can find something likeable in Truscott and McCormick.

Second, however, these artists manage a more difficult task: they compel audiences to recognize their complicity in reproducing gender inequality in everyday ways. By inviting participation while presenting as naïve, these artists leave space open for audiences to imagine exploiting them, or to recognize how others might exploit them. However, these artists do not hand over to audiences the kind of authority apparently granted in much immersive theatre. Rather, despite their apparent naivety, they mostly retain that privilege for themselves, directing audiences to face up to the punishing effects of sexist attitudes as well as audiences' own complicity in maintaining those standards – for example, by 'recognizing' Truscott's and McCormick's personae as apparently vulnerable in the first place. One of the most important ways these shows may ultimately be immersive is by showing how the very cultures they and their audiences are immersed in perpetuate gender inequalities and misogyny, both wittingly and unwittingly.

These are the core claims I want to make about these performance practices in this collection's focus on audience participation and in my current pursuit of effective feminist performance practices. In the face of powerful, profoundly naturalized, and tenaciously persistent gender inequality, these feminist performers do not cultivate the kind of idealized democratic engagement their scenarios show to be fantasy; rather, they cultivate and exploit their own authority to reveal audiences' cultural complicity in a broad spectrum of gender inequality.

Why do we need such performance strategies for feminism now? Perhaps a better question is, how can we not need them? In Germany, 2016 opened with mass sexual assaults on women at New Year's Eve celebrations in Cologne, Hamburg and other cities (Noack 2016). The USA has an infamously misogynist President, Donald J. Trump, who called his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton a 'nasty woman' (see, e.g., Woolf 2016), and was recorded in 2005 boasting that he kisses and gropes women without consent, explaining,

‘When you’re a star they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything’ (quoted in Puglise 2016). Autumn 2017 has been marked by a cascade of revelations and claims about sexually abusive behaviour by powerful men in anglophone film and theatre industries, including American producer Harvey Weinstein, American actor-director Kevin Spacey, English director Max Stafford-Clark, and Irish director Michael Colgan (see Harvie 2018). Gender inequality and violence against women continue, pervasively, to be not only culturally tolerated but condoned and legitimated. Performance has to respond.

***Adrienne Truscott: Asking for It: A One-Lady Rape about Comedy Starring Her Pussy and Little Else***

Adrienne Truscott is an American performer with a long record of feminist burlesque performance as one half of performing duo the Wau Wau Sisters (Wau Wau Sisters n.d.). In 2013, in the wake of a number of high-profile male comedians joking about rape, she started touring her solo comedy show *Asking for It*, subtitled, *A One-Lady Rape about Comedy Starring Her Pussy and Little Else*.<sup>4</sup> The show has two putative focuses: comedy and rape. Truscott plays a persona who speaks with a southern drawl and always has an alcoholic drink in hand. She wears an enormous blonde wig, massive high heels, a tight jean jacket, and, as the title has it, ‘little else’; she spends about the first third of the hour-long show naked from the tops of her shoes to the waist of her jean jacket. In other words, she presents as an exaggerated stereotype of a profoundly naïve ‘dumb blonde’, rendered vulnerable by alcohol and hyperbolically ‘asking for it’ by apparently offering not even the obstruction of underpants.

The first time I saw this show, I did not worry about Truscott; it was October 2013, the venue was Camden People’s Theatre in north London, and I felt I was amongst feminist comrades. The second time I saw *Asking for It*, I did worry. It was at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August 2014, near midnight, in a small single room that was, by day, Bob’s Bookshop. The

performance space was tiny and practically on top of the audience seating. Because of the show's title, its categorization at the Fringe as comedy, and the late-night performance slot, I worried the place would be packed with leery, drunk men eager to see this notorious pussy-exposing show, also possibly eager to touch Truscott, and not very interested in her exploration and condemnation of rape culture. What would Truscott do? Was she really asking for it? What she ostensibly asks for is advice on being a comedian; she introduces herself as a beginner comedian trying to learn the 'rules' of comedy. She observes the prevalence of rape jokes in contemporary stand-up, and her stage is populated with photographic portraits of male comedians who perform such jokes. She explores rape whistles, pop lyrics that boast about rape, and popular cultural attitudes about rape, women and what it is 'safe' for women to dress and behave like.

Though Truscott 'tells' rape jokes, the overarching story of the show is that rape really is not funny, and that freedom of speech arguments put forward to defend rape jokes do not take account of social double standards; namely, that it is predominantly women who are raped and predominantly male comedians who want to protect their right to free speech. By near-opening with the questions, 'So, anyone here been raped? Anyone here raped anyone?' (Truscott 2015), Truscott also emphasizes that it is not just *being* raped that is depressingly culturally prevalent, but therefore necessarily also *doing* raping. Getting her audience onside to condemn rape is easy; what she effects much more subtly is bringing audiences on her side to see how they are all inside, immersed in, and to varying degrees complicit in pervasive cultural attitudes and behaviours that condone a wide spectrum of gendered inequalities and violence, sometimes including rape.

### *The charming persona*

Truscott gets audiences onside partly through her charming and apparently slightly vulnerable persona. She is welcoming and solicitous of her audience, repeatedly asking how we are doing (Truscott 2015). She is especially attentive to audiences near the front of the space in

the little venue, attentive to their proximity to her pussy. To one man in the front row, she comments, 'Your face looks like horror and money well spent' (Truscott). She is also likeable because she is funny, physically and verbally. Physically, she performs striptease, only to reveal *three* layers of jean jackets, *three* layers of wigs, and about *nine* layers of bras (she never reveals her breasts). Several times in the show, there is a blackout and the video of a face of a man singing is projected onto Truscott's bare torso, her pubic hair providing a goatee, simultaneously enhancing the male singer's masculinity and comically undermining it. For example, at one point a video of Andrew Stockdale from the Australian hard rock band Wolfmother singing 'Woman' (2005) is projected onto her belly. The song is ostensibly an anthem to a powerful woman ('She's a woman, you know what I mean; You better listen, listen to me; She's gonna set you free oh oh yeah'). However, its use as a soundtrack for numerous sports-themed computer games and for male buddy films such as *The Hangover Part II* (2011) indicate how its hard rock sound enables its comfortable assimilation by macho cultures. Truscott's re-appropriation and literal re-positioning of the song radically destabilizes the default authority of that macho culture. Verbally, Truscott offers a lot of gags, many of which are puns. But when the audience groans at these, she quips that though they will accept *rape* jokes, when she does just one single pun, 'you guys are like, "Fuck off, we're more *sophisticated* than that"' (Truscott 2015: emphasis original). She does make jokes about rape. She opens, 'Thanks for coming. Bet y'all didn't expect to hear *that* at the rape show' (Truscott: emphasis original). She comments that 'the research was a bitch', but immediately continues, 'as a woman, I also really struggled with what shoes to wear to get taken seriously. But I can see from the back that I fucking nailed it. Look at that' (Truscott). She high-kicks to show her shoe to the back and, in so doing, of course, she separates her legs. As well as being funny, the show implies that Truscott is vulnerable, that she does not fully realize what audiences are salaciously enjoying, and that, given how she is 'asking for it', the show might actually end with her rape, an ending she foreshadows a number of times.

### *Feminist perspective*

This combination of hostess-like friendliness, genuine funniness, and potential vulnerability works to get Truscott's audience on her side and into her perspective. In the striptease sequences, she gets the audience raucously cheering, but she never delivers the payoff, drawing attention to and frustrating some audiences' potential desire to see her fully naked, to consume her as a visual object. By flagging the cultural *desire* for women's sexual exposure, she draws attention to the ethics of that desire. Repeatedly, she claims she is very comfortable, noting, 'I feel real, real comfortable... even if none of you guys do' (Truscott 2015). She controls and leads the dynamics of display and consumption, turning her active gaze on the audience to recalibrate hegemonic gender dynamics that would have *her* as passive spectacle and onlookers as active but invisible voyeurs, and thereby beyond reproach.

Part way through the performance, she asks, 'What's funny? What's a joke? What's comedy? What's a rape? It's really hard for some [people...]. What if we could all agree... at the very least, rape is *rude*?' (Truscott 2015: emphasis original). She then asks some audience members to role-play. Given the topic of rape and the blurriness of her boundaries, the men she asks to participate are reluctant, but they are somehow compelled, perhaps by her cheery assertiveness and/or their sense of pride. She asks them to repeat the word 'no' to her questions. She then asks them repeatedly whether they would like milk in their coffee or cereal; they answer no; and she mimes pouring it anyway, repeatedly. Her male roleplaying partners are symbolically violated by her mimed pouring and she compels them explicitly to articulate the words about sexual consent usually voiced by women: 'no means no'. The bathetic effects of undesired milk standing in for nonconsensual sex, and of rudeness standing in for rape, work powerfully to show that the clearly accurate equation 'no means no' can only be interpreted subjectively in contexts where radically unequal gendered double standards are applied.

Truscott then tests more such double standards. She discusses American male comedian Jim Jefferies and jokes at length that she would not have sex with him. She then teases the

audience that they are disappointed in her and ventriloquizes their reprimand that she, ‘got all shallow and judged a guy because of how he looks [...]. Leave the straight white guy alone’ (Truscott 2015). She recounts how the song ‘U.O.E.N.O’ recorded by Rick Ross in 2013 boasted that he drugged a woman, then raped her: ‘Put Molly [MDMA/ecstasy] all in her champagne, she ain’t even know it; I took her home and I enjoyed that, she ain’t even know it’. In the interests of research, Truscott says, *she* decided to give a man a date rape drug. The audience murmurs disapproval and she replies, ‘Oh come on, equal rights!’ (Truscott 2015); simultaneously, it is clear from the ridiculousness of the ensuing story of her attempt to date-rape a man that she never made any such attempt. She acknowledges that she is ‘asking for it’, that she invites sexual violence. After all, she walks home after dark (‘Cuz I’m over seven’, she observes); and she talks to strangers (‘I call it meeting new people’, she notes) (Truscott 2015). Again, she uses bathos to highlight the perversity of suggesting women are ‘asking for it’ when they behave as adults. But she also shows that these kinds of perverse and patronizing attitudes towards women are familiar because deeply culturally entrenched. She does not say, you recognize this because you *believe* it; but audiences would not recognize it unless they did, somehow, ‘know’ it. Through humor, bathos, inversion, and irony, she powerfully commands audiences’ perspectives to confront sexism.

### *Managed participation*

As well as managing audiences’ perspectives, Truscott manages audiences’ participation. She deliberately seeks audiences who are looking for ‘pussy’ by performing on the male-dominated comedy circuit, often late at night, and offering ‘a lady’, ‘her pussy and little else’. She then appears to fulfill what the ticket offers: she is semi-naked, she seems naïve, she strips. But though she ostensibly gives what is advertised, she also challenges expectations, assumptions, and presumptions. Her nakedness is not to-be-looked-at-ness; it is assertive and in her control; she looks back, and she controls the exposure of her body, never, for example, exposing her breasts. She is apparently naïve, but naivety is a deliberate and quite sophisticated ploy through which she cultivates audiences’ engagement and their effective

entrapment in double standards. She importantly invokes the possibility of audience agency by inviting participation; but rather than simply handing over control, she repeatedly challenges how audiences enact their authority by implicitly undermining the ways they use it, for example, to objectify her body. After her bra striptease and much audience whooping, she comments, 'I'm glad you enjoyed that, y'all. I may be pushing forty but I have the tits of a twelve year old,' simultaneously seeming to collude with the audience in her own sexual objectification while implying the proximity of their response to the abuses of pedophilia. Ultimately, if she immerses her audiences in anything, it is the pervasiveness of gendered inequalities of everyday life. And it is through her careful control of audience engagement that she confronts audiences with their own immersion in, participation in, and complicity with such misogynies.

In this performance, it is not so much that the audience is passive; Truscott seems to provoke catcalls, and she actively solicits the audience to participate by exploiting many features of stand-up comedy, including interaction with audiences, direct address, human scale representation, and performer-audience proximity. But more important is the *performer's* activity and agency; she actively leads her audience to confront uncomfortable truths and to acknowledge their own immersion and engagement in a spectrum of behaviours and attitudes that oppress women. Audiences are both outside the performance, looking in; and audiences are in it, implicated. She is *representing* the problems, and her audiences' engagements with her really *are* the problems; audiences do not have the comfort of distance to excuse themselves from complicity. Truscott exploits the doubleness of theatricality: the performance at once *represents* social relations and shapes the *real* sociality of the occasion (Svendsen 2016). Truscott does not let us forget that we are not just in represented social relations but also in real ones, with real political, social, and personal stakes.

### **Lucy McCormick: *Triple Threat***

Lucy McCormick is a queer femme English performance maker and co-founder of the feminist company GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN (GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN n.d.). Her hour-long version of *Triple Threat* was directed by long-established queer British performer Ursula Martinez and performed, where I first saw it, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in an Underbelly venue in August 2016, co-produced by London's Soho Theatre.<sup>5</sup> It has since toured and appeared twice at London's Soho, where I saw it again in April 2017. *Triple Threat* reenacts the New Testament, recounting the epic story of Jesus as told by the small singing and dancing troupe of Lucy and two supporting very buff, femme-presenting, gender-queer dancer-performers whom she calls her Girl Squad, Ted Rogers and Sam Kennedy (see figure one). The trio tell the story in an hour, in a black box stage space of approximately 12 square meters, using such economies of scale as – for the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh – Gold Blend instant coffee, *frankenfurters*, and *meringues* (all of which get thrown around the performers, stage and auditorium). *Triple Threat* recounts this important part of the story of the holy trinity in a kind of cabaret, incorporating necessarily truncated narrative but also bodily enactment, pop songs, lip-synching, and street dancing, fulfilling in more ways than one the title's colloquial 'triple threat' of singing, dancing and acting.

[FIGURE ONE NEAR HERE]

The trio of performers mostly wear underwear, but these are neither the loincloths of standard biblical iconography, nor the kind of elegant undergarments preferred by much contemporary dance; McCormick usually wears baggy and time-worn y-fronts; Rogers and Kennedy wear showily branded y-fronts. *Triple Threat* assertively incorporates the performance of sexual acts. It opens to reveal McCormick singing with heartfelt emotion... but inaudibly, because she is singing not into a microphone but a dildo (see figure two). Eventually Kennedy gets her to notice what is wrong. Securing a mic, she redeploys the dildo by apparently inserting it into her vagina inside her y-fronts, enlisting Kennedy to hold up her leg and the dildo and

proceeding to enact, you see, Mary's immaculate conception while she continues to sing. Later, Judas's betraying kiss is a scene of deep tongue kissing and heavy petting between McCormick and Rogers. And Kennedy as Doubting Thomas is only persuaded of the 'wounds' of Jesus/McCormick when she has thrust Kennedy's fingers into every orifice in her body, starting with her mouth, nose, eyes and ears and moving to her belly button, vagina and anus – whereupon Thomas/Kennedy finally believes.

[FIGURE TWO NEAR HERE]

By McCormick's own account (Harvie 2017), *Triple Threat* revels in its own preposterousness, by telling one of the most epic and influential stories of all time, and doing so within the profound constraints of the fringe circuit, in a single hour, in a small venue, and with typical – but, here, absurd – economies. The aesthetic is cheap and cheerful, camp, and proudly, joyously queer. It is not immersive theatre, but as a form of live art cabaret, it is actively participatory, semi-immersive performance: the performers directly address the audience; in a break between scenes, McCormick asks audience members about themselves, a task which routinely 'doesn't go that well' (McCormick 2016a); telling the story of Jesus's crucifixion, she invites her audience to fill in the blanks by miming things, such as how he wears a crown of [thorns] and has to carry his own cross up a [hill]; she enlists the audience to take up singing Bryan Adams' 1991 pop hit '(Everything I Do) I Do It for You' after Jesus's death; and she performs the ascension by body-surfing along the upraised hands of the audience, from right upstage to the very back of the auditorium.

*Triple Threat* queers conventional binary and binary-enforcing dynamics – of gender, sexuality, theatre's separation of performers and audiences, and much feminism. It does this by presenting a playful openness, modeling a practice for itself and its audiences that merges fun and political commitment, and establishing a relationship to its audience that is friendly

but also in charge, setting the terms as open while also directed by queer feminist leader Lucy McCormick.

### *Playful openness*

*Triple Threat* models a playful openness that challenges not only religious and sexual proprieties and master narratives, but also stereotyping and binary-enforcing understandings of genders, sexualities, performers versus audiences, comedy versus pornography, and even queerness, with McCormick herself presenting as a ‘passing’, femme – potentially heterosexual – woman who reveals herself and/or her performance to be thoroughly queer. Gender play is fluid: McCormick is the Virgin Mary, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Jesus, Mother Mary, Jesus, and finally a bearded God, as well as, always and/or partly herself; Kennedy and Rogers likewise take up roles both conventionally male and female, including worshipping kings and mourning women. Narrative is playfully irreverent: McCormick depicts King Herod’s massacre of the innocents by devouring a carton of Innocent brand smoothie; Jesus’s temptation in the desert is performed by lip-synching the 1997 debut single of Destiny’s Child, ‘No No No Pt 1’, while Rogers tempts McCormick with cigarettes, lager and Nutella. Genre is dynamic. In conversation with me, McCormick commented that she sees the show variously as comedy-as-pornography and/or pornography-as-comedy (McCormick 2016b). She and the other performers execute what might be seen as pornographic acts such as using the dildo, snogging, heavy petting, and vaginal and anal fingering, but also make them ridiculous or comical. The show’s engagement with gender, sexuality, and pornography is not pious or judgmental but rather open, exploratory, and fun.

### *Fun and politics*

*Triple Threat* models a practice that merges fun and political commitment, insisting on the value and potential inseparability of both while also, importantly, enlisting audiences in this practice. In an interview in November 2016 with me, McCormick talked about being led in making this show by her desire to do what she wants to do, namely, sing and dance to pop

songs (McCormick 2016b). But she also talked about that fun as producing a kind of ‘carbon footprint’ of indulgence that she feels she needs to pay back through politically committed work (McCormick 2016). Her story of Jesus is peppered with fun, funny, and anachronistic dance sequences that draw energetically, expertly, and hilariously on stock pop video moves and sequences; her soundtrack juxtaposes the story of Jesus with an array of familiar, sing-a-long-able, heart-string-pulling pop tunes by the likes of Destiny’s Child, Bryan Adams, Snow Patrol, and Justin Bieber; and her costuming incorporates the faux-heroism of a handmade Adidas cape (see figure two), the bathos and irreverence of a mourning veil formed out of an Adidas jacket (see figure one), and numerous putative wardrobe malfunctions that leave her apparently unknowingly bare-bottomed and/or breast-exposed, like Janet Jackson in the infamous ‘Nipplegate’ of the 2004 Superbowl half-time show.

Hilariously preposterous the show may be, but it is also emphatically political. McCormick’s apparently naïve combination of Bible and pop asks what the important myths and mythic forms of our times are – the ones that most move audiences and that people can and want to sing and dance to – and whose stories they are, men’s and/or women’s. Her faux-heroic costumes ask questions about putative gender and class appropriateness, and her malfunctioning wardrobe challenges the pieties and gendered oppressions of cultural shaming. Crucially, her fun naivety also gets audiences onside, so that when she shifts register, she takes audiences with her to focus on uncomfortable things. After Jesus’s death, McCormick performs as Mother Mary and sings Snow Patrol’s somber 2004 single ‘Run (I’ll sing one last time for you)’. She moves into the audience, emoting, and gradually gets very distraught, until she ends up back on stage, prostrate in apparent grief, screaming, and with her bare bottom exposed, having popped the fasteners on the crotch of her body suit. She compels audiences to look at and face what they might not like to see – a woman screaming, with grief. This is Jesus’s story but from Mary’s perspective.

*Fun but firm leadership*

As that example indicates, McCormick establishes a relationship with the audience that is friendly and fun but also in charge, not only refusing the oppressions of Laura Mulvey's voyeuristic to-be-looked-at-ness, but joyfully embracing a semi-naïve but effective leadership. *McCormick* leads audiences through the show. *She* organizes the dildo for the scene of immaculate conception, instructing her assistant on what to do. When she is snogging Judas, *she* directs Kennedy as the arresting officer with a hand gesture on the point at which to come and arrest her; Kennedy does not initiate this; *she* commands it. *She* controls where Doubting Thomas (played by Kennedy) puts his fingers and how he moves them. And *she* orchestrates the audience's participation. Before the ascension scene, she announces it is 'Time to wrap up the play and think about what it means', stating 'It's about democracy' (McCormick 2016a). She invites everyone in the audience who wants to participate to form a corridor of upraised hands on which she can body-surf semi-naked to her ascension. Throughout her ascension, she repeatedly checks, 'Everyone ok?', and reminds audiences to 'fill in the gaps' and that 'no one is above anyone else' (McCormick 2016a). These phrases pay satirical lip service to the physical risk of the scene, engage the audience in that risk as much as McCormick, and propose a kind of democratic engagement that is, however, led by *her* – our very fallible, messy, female, martyr-hero. She engages and celebrates democracy but also mocks its altruism. In terms of the power dynamics between audience and performer, she shares the power, definitely on her terms, but her terms are quite open. In my experience of the ascension scene, the audience was very careful of her body, taking care to keep it aloft and also not to touch her 'inappropriately'. In interview she told me, however, that in the terms established by the performance, the boundary on what is inappropriate is quite open (McCormick 2016b).

McCormick's persona in *Triple Threat*, like Truscott's in *Asking for It*, is ostensibly naïve; caught up in her own self-importance, she apparently does not see her own absurdity and vulnerability to sexist voyeurism. But like Truscott's naivety, McCormick's too is a ploy. Like Truscott, she uses it to seduce audiences into adopting perspectives which might

perceive her in patronising or sexist ways, but her ultimate control of her persona, and therefore her control of her audiences, gives her the upper hand in the balance of dramaturgical power at work in the performance. Like Truscott's, McCormick's performance reveals audiences' embeddedness – or immersion – in sexist cultures, and audiences' complicity in those cultures. At the same time, her joyous engagement with her audience, like Truscott's, invites them to join her also on the side of critique of that sexism.

### **The importance of feminist authority**

Both of these shows offer empowering feminist self-representation and critique. They bring their audiences onside through charm, attractiveness, funniness, wit, as well as faux-naivety. They manage audiences' perspectives and they manage audience participation, making audiences confront their embeddedness in sexist cultures. These performances enable some interaction and participation, largely to establish camaraderie between performer and audience. However, they also withhold audience agency in order to preserve agency for the performers, drawing attention to the conventional gender dynamics that might suggest these women should give up authority, preserving that authority for these women to command their critique, and allowing them to lead audiences not only to see sexism but to see their own structural participation in it. And these feminist performers are not alone in such work. Others working at the generic boundaries of live art, stand-up comedy and cabaret and using some similar feminist strategies include Split Britches, Lauren Bari Holstein, and Hot Brown Honey.

In seeking the most politically progressive theatre, we might seek performance which seems to do the good and important work of extending democracy; but we must also pay attention to performance which effectively denies audience agency in order to withhold authority from audiences so that it can confront them with unpalatable truths, such as the persistence of misogyny. We must pay attention to performance which reserves agency *for performers* who compel us to look at the limits of our democracies and the conditions which produce those

limits and their inequalities. This is not the widely dispersed agency of a fantasy of democracy, but nor is it fascism; it is effective leadership and persuasion that are making audiences face what needs facing.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Alston notes that immersive theatre, in particular, requires ‘productive participation’ from audiences, but also risks being ‘escapist’ for them, or encouraging their ‘explorative pursuit of *personal* pleasure’ (Alston 2016: 2-3; italics added). These modes of what Keren Zaiontz calls ‘narcissistic spectatorship’ (Zaiontz 2014: 407) foreground the priority – possibly empowerment

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– of the individual audience member, but not in ways that contribute to democracy as the *collective* action of a *group* of people.

<sup>3</sup> In *Fair Play*, I explore how immersive theatre risks offering the kind of spectacle that evacuates social interaction (Harvie 2013: 183-4), and how, broadly, ‘The social engagement [that] delegated performance [including immersive performance] offers can [...] be seen as at best limited, possibly compromising and even malign. The agency and egalitarianism it proffers can be modest, superficially placating or problematically and spectacularly distracting, diverting attention from, for example, the simultaneous *material* disempowerment of millions of people by increasingly insecure global labour markets [...]. It can conscript audiences’ participation in acts, situations and dynamics they might not otherwise support’ (Harvie 2013, p. 41, italics original). That said, I do respect the democratic politics of immersive theatre work by the likes of, for example, Metis Arts, including their *3<sup>rd</sup> Ring Out* (2008-12) and *World Factory* (2015) (Metis Arts 2013).

<sup>4</sup> For research purposes, Truscott kindly shared with me a video recording of the show made at The Creek and Cave in Queens, New York, in September 2015.

<sup>5</sup> *Triple Threat* began life as a series of short performances in queer clubs and other venues. For research purposes, McCormick kindly shared with me a video recording of the show made at the Underbelly, Edinburgh, in August 2016.