

## **By the Book: Adaptation, Work and Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz***

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### **Abstract:**

This article focuses on *Gatz* (2004 – 2012), the Elevator Repair Service production which staged every last word of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, using it as a prism through which to look at theatre and work in the context of neoliberal capitalism. With reference to both adaptation studies and the concept of immaterial labour, I argue that adaptations in general and *Gatz* in particular offer a fertile site for exploring the complexities of theatrical work. In rendering *The Great Gatsby* for the stage, Elevator Repair Service make explicit many of the different forms of labour that theatre usually seeks to conceal, thus disrupting capitalist relations in ways similar to those discussed by Nicholas Ridout in *Passionate Amateurs* and *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*. The article also suggests that, as well as prompting productive questions about the hierarchy, division and visibility of creative work, *Gatz's* critique of immaterial labour has the potential to shift popular understandings of theatre away from the idea of the individual genius and towards recognition of collaborative creative labour.

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In a bland, run-down, windowless office, Nick's computer is on the blink. Waiting impatiently for it to reboot, he chances upon a book and begins to read aloud, speaking incongruously of parties, fast cars and illicit lovers. As the rhythms of the working day continue around him, seemingly unimpeded by the intrusion of this narrative, his fellow office workers gradually take on the other roles in the tale. Mugs become cocktail glasses and tax returns transform into party invitations. A swivel chair is suddenly a car; a shower of papers conjures the careless hedonism of an impromptu afternoon party. In Elevator Repair Service's (ERS) deliberately drab rendering of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the quintessential American jazz era novel, Gatsby's decadent, champagne-soaked lawn parties have given way to the relentless slog of the nine-to-five.<sup>1</sup> As theatre critic Matt Trueman succinctly puts it, 'The American Dream has brought about the American Drudge'.<sup>2</sup>

The scene described above begins to suggest some of the multiple, overlapping layers of labour at play in *Gatz*. ERS's production, which toured the world between 2004 and 2012, staged every last word of Fitzgerald's text in a performance that lasted eight hours with two intervals and a dinner break – the length of an average working day. Through this simple but surprising conceit, audiences were invited to consider the work of the performers feeling their way through the challenges of staging a book; the artistic labour expended by Fitzgerald in crafting the novel; the everyday drudgery invoked by the office setting, doubled with the performers' own labour in putting on the show; and the work – if we can characterise it as such – demanded of audience members themselves, who were required to break the usual temporal division of work and leisure to experience the eight-hour performance, which was framed in the media as an act of endurance for all involved. As a prism through which to view ideas about theatre and work, *Gatz* offers myriad facets, making explicit through its staging many of the tensions between labour and

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<sup>1</sup> *Gatz*, Noel Coward Theatre, 9th June 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Matt Trueman, 'Review: *Gatz*, Public Theatre, New York', <<http://mattrueman.co.uk/2010/11/review-gatz-public-theatre-new-york.html>> [accessed 6th March 2014].

leisure that the theatrical machinery usually strives to conceal. For this reason, it provides a particularly useful site for beginning to explore the complexities of theatrical work within the context of the increasingly normalised precarity of immaterial labour under neoliberal capitalism.

What do we mean here by work? When discussing creative acts we are apt to ask, like poet Patricia Lockwood, 'IS [sic] it work though?'<sup>3</sup> As I will explore in more depth later, the work of artists – be they novelists or theatre-makers – is often framed as a labour of love; it is typically undertaken out of passion and does not always result in a financial reward. This activity is therefore ripe for denigration, set in belittling opposition to the 'hard work' performed by others and criticised for its lack of visible economic productivity, a point that has frequently been the focus of debates about the state subsidy of the arts in Britain.<sup>4</sup> However, as 'a piece of work that has been or is to be performed; a task', creative work fulfils one of the most basic definitions of labour.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, artistic labour produces commodities – a novel like *The Great Gatsby*, or even a piece of seemingly ephemeral but still purchasable performance such as *Gatz* – which then enter circulation in a capitalist economy. It thus meets Marx's description of the labour process as 'purposeful activity aimed at the production of use-values', and these use-values have an exchange-value in the wider market.<sup>6</sup> As much as it may aspire to resist capitalist flows of exchange, art still resides firmly within that system. It is my suggestion, further, that the position of the artist in capitalism, and neoliberal capitalism specifically, offers both an ideal model for a particular kind of work and the possibility to begin disrupting that work from within.

In its interrogation of the different layers of work revealed through ERS's

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Lockwood, 'Is it Work?', *Poetry Foundation*, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/04/is-it-work/>> [accessed 10th February 2015].

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, former Culture Secretary Maria Miller's insistence that the arts must emphasise its value to the economy, BBC, 'Maria Miller: Arts must make economic case', *BBC News*, 24th April 2013 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22267625>> [accessed 10th February 2015]; Centre for Economics and Business Research Ltd., *The contribution of the arts and culture to the national economy: Report for Arts Council England and the National Museum Directors' Council*, May 2013 <[http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/CEBR\\_economic\\_report\\_web\\_version\\_0513.pdf](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/CEBR_economic_report_web_version_0513.pdf)> [accessed 10th February 2015].

<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 'labour | labor, n.', *OED Online*, December 2014 (Oxford University Press) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/104732?rskey=rXVH5A&result=1>> [accessed 10th February 2015].

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy - Volume One*, trans. By Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1976), p.290.

production of *Gatz*, this paper takes as its starting point two key propositions. The first is that the staging of a literary, non-theatrical text offers fertile ground for exploring contested ideas about artistic labour and hierarchies of creation, because it foregrounds the process of transforming a text into a performance and thereby reveals the various tensions that sit under that process. Linda Hutcheon, a prominent voice in adaptation studies, suggests that there is still something about adaptations that makes us ‘uneasy’,<sup>7</sup> a suggestion upheld by recent fraught critical conversations and symposium discussions on the subject.<sup>8</sup> My second, connected proposition is that a reconsideration of adaptations such as *Gatz* may allow us to shift popular understandings of theatre away from the idea of the individual genius, who may indeed work but whose inspiration is culturally conceived of as mysterious and isolated, and towards a wider recognition of collaborative creative labour. This is vital because, as Jen Harvie warns, a prioritisation of the individual artist ‘betrays ideological commitments to the (privileged) individual over the (less privileged) group and to a romanticised sense of expression as spontaneous over recognising it as time-consuming labour’, thereby eliding the work of many of those involved, with potentially damaging political, economic and artistic consequences.<sup>9</sup> It is a transformation of this creative hierarchy of labour and its implications for the wider socio-economic context that I will gesture towards in this paper.

In moving forward from those two central propositions, it is necessary first to understand the precise nature of ERS’s staging of *The Great Gatsby* and the creative work that it is doing. Hutcheon helpfully suggests that we understand adaptations as ‘palimpsestuous’ objects – art works that are ‘haunted at all times by their adapted texts’.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, watching *Gatz* is always an experience of simultaneously watching two or more texts: the written text of Fitzgerald’s novel, the performance text of ERS’s production, and perhaps also the cultural traces of other *Gatsby*

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon, with Siobhan O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p.3.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Michael Billington’s review of 1984 for *The Guardian* and the respective responses of Lyn Gardner and Andrew Haydon. In addition, TaPRA held an interim event on 15th February 2014 addressing the topic of ‘Radical Adaptation’.

<sup>9</sup> Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp.116-117.

<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon, p.6.

adaptations. As David Lane argues, an audience's reading of an adaptation is almost always 'double-coded', because 'we interpret not only the meaning of a play in its own right, but also its relationship to an original source text'.<sup>11</sup> In the case of *Gatz*, its source text's narrative of parties, affairs and shimmering facades offers a vehicle for ideas about money, the shifting social and economic landscape of the USA in the 1920s, and the aspirational ideology enshrined in the American Dream. Published in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* pre-dates and somewhat presciently anticipates the Wall Street Crash of 1929, when the myth of endless growth and ambition began to crumble, but the novel is already implicitly critical of the reckless pursuit of wealth, status and pleasure, depicting a world in which the excess of Gatsby and his friends is contrasted with the daily grind of characters such as maligned mechanic George Wilson.<sup>12</sup>

However, the haunted viewing experience described by Hutcheon and Lane is not one that ERS seek to mitigate; rather, their mode of staging enhances it. I have referred to *Gatz* within the framework of adaptation, but this is in fact a framework that the company itself has resisted as a description of its 'accidental literary trilogy', which also includes stagings of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway.<sup>13</sup> According to Sara Jane Bailes, in these productions the company 'stage the encounter between literature and drama' through a process that is more akin to translation than adaptation.<sup>14</sup> In one sense, this distinction is a useful one: adaptations usually tweak and streamline the adapted work to fit within the restraints of their destination medium, while the metaphor of translation suggests that the source remains intact and unabridged as it is transfigured into a new art form. However, the difference between translation and adaptation in this context, much like the definition of adaptation itself, is by no means clear. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier suggest that 'adaptation includes almost any

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<sup>11</sup> David Lane, *Contemporary British Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 159-160.

<sup>12</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Alyssa Alpine, 'An Irresistible Problem: John Collins on Adapting "The Sun Also Rises"', *Culturebot*, 20th September 2011 <<http://www.culturebot.org/2011/09/11280/an-irresistible-problem-john-collins-on-adapting-the-sun-also-rises/>> [accessed 17th January 2015]

<sup>14</sup> Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 150-151.

act of alteration performed upon specific cultural works of the past', a particularly open definition that Hutcheon dismisses as too broad.<sup>15</sup> She instead asserts that adaptation is 'an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works', involves both (re-)interpretation and (re-)creation, and has an intertextual relationship with the adapted work.<sup>16</sup> *Gatz*, with its movement from one medium to another and its simultaneous acknowledgement and reinterpretation of *The Great Gatsby*, could be seen to meet all of these criteria. Furthermore, Hutcheon suggests that Walter Benjamin's construction of translation as 'an engagement with the original text that makes us see that text in different ways' offers a helpful way of thinking about adaptation, essentially dissolving the distinction drawn by Bailes.<sup>17</sup>

While interrogating such definitions of adaptation any further would distract from the central focus of this paper, these theoretical debates provide useful context for ERS's performance strategies in bringing *The Great Gatsby* to the stage. We might do best to think of *Gatz* as at once paradoxically an adaptation and not an adaptation, thereby allowing the discussion to encompass both how ERS subvert notions of adaptation by offering a full, unedited reading of Fitzgerald's text, and how *Gatz* nonetheless operates within the long-established cultural context of adaptation and interpretation. Certainly the company's intention was never to work on an adaptation; artistic director John Collins explains that they turned to Fitzgerald's novel simply in an attempt to 'shock us into new ideas' and, echoing Bailes, discusses 'the problems of translating a book to the stage'.<sup>18</sup> By eschewing or finding new possibilities in adaptation, meanwhile, *Gatz* participates in interesting and contradictory ways in an economy of cultural value. In resisting conventional processes of adaptation, ERS also resist the commercial connotations that tend to attach to adaptations – and which Hutcheon posits as a source of our uneasiness about such cultural products – but by preserving the prose of a canonical piece of literature, their production potentially secures itself a place in high art discourses.

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London: Psychology Press, 2000), p.4.

<sup>16</sup> Hutcheon, pp.7-9.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>18</sup> Alpine.

What ERS's intervention in the area of theatrical adaptation means in practice is a performance in which process is underlined rather than obscured. Whereas traditional adaptations might attempt to smooth any edges that appear rough when transported to the stage, altering the original to make it work within a theatrical vocabulary – typically by drawing out its most conventionally 'dramatic' features – *Gatz*'s navigation of its source text appears to unfold before an audience in real time. From the moment performer Scott Shepherd as Nick picks up the book and begins to read, he and his fellow cast members cultivate the impression of searching for ways to stage the text as it increasingly invades the office space. Solutions to staging problems, such as amusingly makeshift props, often appear as surprises. It is likely, given the working methods of the company, that many of these staging solutions did in fact first emerge as surprises during rehearsals; Bailes describes ERS's way of working as 'practice-as-discovery', emphasising the role of mistake and coincidence.<sup>19</sup> In *Gatz*, this sequence of creative accidents is then made legible on the stage, while the company deliberately highlight moments of slippage between text and performance. In one memorable moment, for example, Shepherd reads a line describing how women used to rub champagne into Gatsby's hair, before looking at the balding Jim Fletcher – the actor portraying the eponymous protagonist – and shrugging his shoulders. Through ERS's process of discovery and our constant awareness of the novel, both as a physical object in Shepherd's hands and as a series of words that overlap and occasionally clash with the performers' actions, attention is thus repeatedly drawn to the 'encounter' with literature and to the creative work that this involves.

As well as opening up the text to a range of creative voices, whose input is made visible on stage as described briefly above, ERS's approach extends the invitation one step further: to the audience. Discussing the importance of maintaining the 'bookness' of *The Great Gatsby*, Collins has spoken about the significance of the audience's imagination in the experience of the show. He suggests that 'a dirty, messy office, something mundane and pedestrian like that, is a better way to watch

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<sup>19</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, p.149.

people's imaginations taking control of them'.<sup>20</sup> Certainly imagination is required if we are to pretend that a scattered selection of office stationery is the detritus of a wild party, or that the set's shabby collection of tables and chairs represents Gatsby's mansion. I would contend, however, that it is not as simple as seeing one thing and mentally replacing it with another; in this sense, it is not entirely accurate to say, as Rebecca Mead of the *New Yorker* does, that *Gatz* 'dramatizes the experience of reading *The Great Gatsby*'.<sup>21</sup> There are indeed similarities with the experience of reading, but whereas when we are reading a book the only raw material our imagination is provided with is the words on the page, here it is also offered an abundance of images and sounds. Taking its theoretical lead from Dan Rebellato, who has persuasively claimed that all theatrical representation is essentially metaphorical, my argument is that *Gatz* acts as a metaphor for *The Great Gatsby*.<sup>22</sup> As Rebellato explains, when watching a piece of theatre we understand that the two objects in question – here *The Great Gatsby* and ERS's production of *Gatz* – are separate, 'but we think of one in terms of the other'.<sup>23</sup> *Gatz* therefore invites us to think about a piece of literature through the imaginative lens of work, underlining both how this novel itself, with its stark contrast between those who have to work and those who have the leisure to indulge in endless parties, might have something to say about labour in the present day, and how collective creative work is required to render it for the stage.

While they perform the actions of the working day for the purposes of their fiction, the members of ERS are also simultaneously engaged in their own work – the work of performing. The work of the theatre-maker, as I will go on to discuss in more detail later, is interestingly ambiguous. These are workers who labour to fill the leisure time of others, but whose work is also usually a source of great love. This, however, should not seduce us into forgetting that it is still a form of work; as

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<sup>20</sup> John Collins, 'ERS's GATZ - Interview', Walker Art Centre, 8th June 2006 <<http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2006/elevator-repair-services-gatz>> [accessed 13th March 2014].

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Mead, 'Onward and Upward With the Arts - Adaptation: Putting "The Great Gatsby"—every word of it—onstage', *The New Yorker*, 27th September 2010 <[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/09/27/100927fa\\_fact\\_mead](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/09/27/100927fa_fact_mead)> [accessed 13th March 2014].

<sup>22</sup> Dan Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses, Or, What do we see when we see a play?', *Performance Research* 14:1 (2009), 17-28, (p.25).

<sup>23</sup> Rebellato, p.25.

Nicholas Ridout usefully reminds us, 'The actor is not the spontaneous creative genius of the autonomous artistic realm, but a labourer in the same economy as everyone else'.<sup>24</sup> For the performers appearing in *Gatz*, an eight-hour long show which the company performed for nine years, that labour is arguably greater – and certainly more visible – than that of many of their artistic colleagues. This is reflected in the ways in which various company members have spoken about the experience. Shepherd, for instance, told *The Guardian* that the only way he can get through the performance is to treat it 'like a regular day at work'.<sup>25</sup> While Shepherd's performance is clearly an impressive feat of memory and endurance, however, the virtuosity involved places him at the top of an implicit hierarchy of labour within the performance, while the less prominent, repetitive labour of some of his fellow performers shares more in common with the daily grind of the average office worker.

As company member Kate Scelsa explains, the role played by her and a number of other performers in the show was 'very practical', often involving the less glamorous and creatively fulfilling tasks of moving around props and ensuring that everything happened on cue. As a result, Scelsa 'approached the performance with a very practical mindset', mainly thinking about how to 'get through it'. The choice of language here recalls that of workers discussing strategies for coping with the nine to five; later, Scelsa even uses the word 'drudgery' to describe particularly difficult performances, explaining how she used her boredom and frustration to inform her character, an unimpressed secretary.<sup>26</sup> The production also draws attention to other forms of repetitive labour carried out by supporting cast members, many of whom are repeatedly shown filing paper, tidying the stage and moving props – all at the same time, of course, as their characters escape the realm of work through the imagination of the novel. As the work of the office fades in and out of the stage action, the work of making theatre, from performing to preparing the stage, is repeatedly rendered visible, both in its virtuosity and in its drudgery. While referring to 'drudgery' in this

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<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p.28.

<sup>25</sup> Emma Brockes, 'Gatz: The greater Gatsby', *The Guardian*, 29th April 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/apr/29/gatz-greater-gatsby>> [accessed 13th March 2014].

<sup>26</sup> Kate Scelsa, Email to author, 22nd March 2014.

context may appear disingenuous as soon as we compare creative labour – done out of love and often enabled by various structures of privilege – with the much less rewarding and more arduous work demanded in other sectors, the internal and external mechanisms that drive the working lives of artists are at the vanguard of a new economy of immaterial labour in globalised neoliberal societies, as I discuss below, making this particular labour significant within a wider framework.

To return to my two initial propositions, we have seen how ERS's process of staging *The Great Gatsby* uncovers some of the tensions that surround the creative work of transforming text into production, but before we can reach a full understanding of the labour involved and its wider implications, this production must be situated within its context. It is therefore imperative to consider, as an extension of the work being done by the company, the material conditions of *Gatz*'s creation and the various economic, social and political contexts in which it sits. In discussing this framework, it is important not to conflate the British context in which *Gatz* was presented as part of the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) in June 2012 with the US context in which ERS, a New York-based company, are working. In this paper I am primarily concerned with the former, while at the same time locating this within a wider globalised context that also incorporates the latter. I will be broadly characterising this globalised context as that of neoliberalism, which David Harvey helpfully defines as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade'.<sup>27</sup> As a form of capitalism, neoliberalism has spread across the globe from the 1980s onwards, with Harvey claiming that it is now 'hegemonic as a mode of discourse'.<sup>28</sup> There is, further, a claim by scholars such as Maurizio Lazzarato, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello that the new capitalism has brought with it new, 'post-Fordist' labour systems, marked by a shift from hierarchy and security to flexible networks,

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<sup>27</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

financially precarious working conditions and often immaterial outputs, all sweetened by the promise of greater individual autonomy for workers.

Considering these economic conditions at the start of the twenty-first century, Ridout argues that ‘the “artist” in general, and the performing artist in particular, is a paradigmatic example of the immaterial laborer in post-Fordist capitalism and that immaterial labor itself is now taken by some to be the paradigmatic form of labor in post-Fordist capitalism’.<sup>29</sup> Looming large in the work of Ridout and others is this idea that immaterial labour, which Hardt and Negri define as ‘labour that produces an immaterial good’,<sup>30</sup> such as communication, information or affect, has become the exemplary model of work under neoliberal capitalism, in turn producing ‘Precariousness, hyperexploitation, mobility, and hierarchy’.<sup>31</sup> Instead of clear career trajectories and jobs for life, emphasis has moved towards constant movement and reskilling, with recent labour patterns in the UK showing a corresponding increase in part-time, freelance and zero hours contracts, often masked by official overall rises in employment.<sup>32</sup> In many ways, cultural work presents an ideal example of immaterial labour, marrying as it does often intangible outputs with precarious working conditions, ever-lengthening hours and the insidious erosion of distinctions between work and life – all of which is endured and even celebrated under the banner of creativity, self-expression and flexibility. Love for one’s work becomes an agent of one’s own exploitation. As Rosalind Gill and Andy Platt put it, artists and other cultural workers ‘have been identified as the poster boys and girls of the new “precariat”’.<sup>33</sup>

This is the socio-economic context in which the members of ERS inescapably

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<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism and Love* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p.115.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), p.289.

<sup>31</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Immaterial Labor’, in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds. *Radical Thought In Italy: A Potential Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp.133-147 (p.137).

<sup>32</sup> See reports compiled by the Trades Union Congress (TUC): <<http://www.tuc.org.uk/economic-issues/labour-market-and-economic-reports/only-one-every-forty-net-jobs-recession-full-time>> and the Office for National Statistics (ONS): <<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lmac/contracts-with-no-guaranteed-hours/zero-hours-contracts/art-zero-hours.html>> <<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lmac/self-employed-workers-in-the-uk/2014/rep-self-employed-workers-in-the-uk-2014.html>> [accessed 28th January 2015].

<sup>33</sup> Rosalind Gill and Andy Platt, ‘In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 25:7-8 (2008), 1-30 (p.3).

find themselves. As precarious cultural workers, the divisions between their work and their leisure are rarely clear cut; most company members have at one time or another held down additional jobs to subsidise their theatre work, meaning that the time they spend making theatre is not precisely work and at the same time, to borrow Ridout's phrase, is 'not-not work'.<sup>34</sup> Formed in 1991 by Collins, who remains the only common ingredient in all of ERS's productions, the company initially relied on its members working other jobs in order to subsidise its creative activity, while the fluid, ever-changing composition of its ensemble reflects the sometimes harsh economic realities of pursuing an existence as an artist. What Collins describes as the 'utopian model' of a permanent ensemble is simply unsustainable within current economic structures in the USA.<sup>35</sup> The company's artistic response to the precarity of their situation, however, has been to challenge this on a number of levels. The first of these is the organisation of the company, which holds onto the ideal of the utopian ensemble even in the knowledge of its practical impossibility. While Collins cautions against the democratic myth of the ensemble, which 'confuses an organizational strategy with an artistic practice', and describes ERS's structure as existing 'somewhere between egalitarianism and traditional theater hierarchy', according to him the company remains committed to the idea of collaborative creation over individual genius.<sup>36</sup> Collins characterises the power balance and hierarchy within the company as dynamic and insists that 'the group has collaborative authorship' over all of its work, even though he is the sole uniting element of ERS's extensive oeuvre.<sup>37</sup>

In terms of the company's aesthetic, meanwhile, it is one that is coloured by a persistent and arguably political interest in failure. Describing ERS's process, Bailes explains that the 'outcomes of radically committing to a strict formal conceit – here, the failures and difficulties that arise when bringing literature and non-dramatic text to the stage without transposing the text to first person dialogue – are seized upon and

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<sup>34</sup> Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs*, p.106.

<sup>35</sup> John Collins, 'Elevator Repair Service and the Wooster Group: Ensembles Surviving Themselves', John Britton, ed., *Encountering Ensemble* (London: Methuen, 2013), pp.234-249 (p.247).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.235; p.243.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.249.

explored,' both in the rehearsal room and in performance.<sup>38</sup> She argues that through the staging of failure and the breaking apart of theatrical conventions, 'the theatre event is made to evidence the way in which control and the value of the art work are ideologically conceived of, administered, and reified through the preconceived rules of theatre practice', representing a 'willful disruption of power'.<sup>39</sup> While I am not fully convinced by the strength of Bailes' claims for the radical potential of failure in performance, which has itself become something of a trope within contemporary theatre practice, there is a sense in which the staging of mistakes and missteps in ERS's work disrupts the skills economy of neoliberal capitalism, which constantly demands the mastering of new tasks. Finally, as in *Gatz*, the workings of the company's labour may be inscribed and thus revealed through their shows. As Bailes documents, ERS 'takes inspiration from an aesthetics marked by imperfection, the provisional nature of temporary and sometimes inappropriate circumstances, and the invention that recycling space, material and dialogue can reveal'.<sup>40</sup> The office setting that is so central to critical readings of *Gatz*, for example, was initially a simple outcome of circumstances: the company were temporarily rehearsing in an upstairs office at The Wooster Group's Performing Garage in New York because they had nowhere else to work, and as they explored the idea of a staged reading of *The Great Gatsby*, this setting increasingly made sense to them. As Scelsa comments, the office 'gave us a way in for solving problems about how to stage the whole thing'.<sup>41</sup> In this way, the economic challenges that the company faces are turned around, used as creative spurs for their theatre, and defiantly displayed on stage in ways that begin to disrupt the usual stage fiction that attempts to hide labour.

We must be careful, though, not to overstate the challenge or rupture that ERS's performance strategies represent, nor to elide the very real material distinctions between artistic work and other forms of labour under neoliberal

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<sup>38</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, p.151.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167.

<sup>40</sup> Sara Jane Bailes, 'ERS - *Cab Legs* (1997) to *Gatz* (2006) - Reversing the ruins: the power of theatrical miscomprehension', in Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender, eds. *Making Contemporary Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010, pp.81-100 (p.87).

<sup>41</sup> Kate Scelsa, Email to author, 22nd March 2014.

capitalism. I have already voiced a note of doubt over the radical resistance offered by an aesthetics of failure, which has stultified into something of a tired convention in the last few decades, as traced at length by Liz Tomlin.<sup>42</sup> In its flexible hierarchies and fluctuating workforce, meanwhile, ERS largely – if unintentionally – models the ideal working conditions of neoliberal capitalism. However, the ways in which ERS and other artists are, to borrow the words of Rosalind Gill, ‘emblematic of this neoliberal moment’ might offer the key to the critique that they are able to advance.<sup>43</sup> This is not, crucially, to ignore the differences between the experiences of specific workers in specific industries, or the different meanings that these workers may attach to their labour. As already mentioned, cultural workers frequently find their work pleasurable and fulfilling – Gill and Platt observe that a ‘vocabulary of love is repeatedly evinced’<sup>44</sup> – and, most importantly, they are in the privileged position of being able to *choose* unstable but sporadically rewarding working conditions. As Andrew Ross points out, ‘precarity is unevenly experienced [...], since contingent work arrangements are imposed on some and self-elected by others’.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, in offering the ideal model for a structure of precarious labour that has much wider – and in many cases more damaging – economic, social and political ramifications, the theatre is a particularly pertinent location for a disruption or questioning of such structures, as well as having a form that lends itself to deconstruction and self-reflexivity.

We might pause at this point to consider that material conditions have just as much of an effect on audiences as on artists; in Hutcheon’s words, ‘The contexts of creation and reception are material, public, and economic as much as they are cultural, personal, and aesthetic’.<sup>46</sup> While audience reception is almost impossible to measure, it seems fair to assume that audiences’ expectations, and so to an extent

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<sup>42</sup> See Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the real in performance practice and theory, 1990-2010* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Rosalind Gill, ‘Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia’, in Roisin Flood & Rosalind Gill, eds., *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp.228-244 (p.240).

<sup>44</sup> Gill and Platt, p.15.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Ross, ‘The New Geography of Work: Power to the Precarious?’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 25:7-8 (2008), 31-49 (p.42).

<sup>46</sup> Hutcheon, p.28.

their experience of any piece of art, are heavily informed by the context in which it is situated and the discourse that surrounds it. I would concur here with Marvin Carlson that audiences 'are responding not to the elements being presented, but to the presentation of them within the frame of performance expectations', and therefore that frame must also be considered.<sup>47</sup> Based on the media buzz heralding *Gatz's* arrival to London in 2012, British audiences might well have prepared themselves for a test of their theatrical stamina – a performance that was 'hard work'. In a preview article for *The Guardian*, Emma Brockes writes that the show 'looks like punishment',<sup>48</sup> while the reviews all prime theatregoers for a rough ride, using phrases such as 'bum-numbing commitment'<sup>49</sup> and 'endurance test'.<sup>50</sup> While the use of such description, which veers on the hyperbolic, might be attributed to a combination of journalistic convention and a strategic attempt to lure in readers, these assessments of the show are nonetheless likely to have coloured the expectations of audiences attending *Gatz* during LIFT. Indeed, in my own experience of watching the show I was struck by how many of my fellow spectators arrived armed with pillows, flasks and snacks, clearly prepared for what was perceived to be an arduous – if attractively novel – theatregoing marathon. This popular discourse also sits interestingly at odds with the production's location in the Noël Coward Theatre in the West End, a cultural context more usually associated with leisure, entertainment and commercialism than with hard work.

The media's cultivation of the idea that watching *Gatz* is a tough slog, as well as resonating with the show's interrogation of work, bears some striking resemblances to the marketing and press surrounding a trio of Samuel Beckett plays at the Royal Court in 2014.<sup>51</sup> In particular, the performance of Beckett's famous monologue *Not I* was framed as an ordeal for actor Lisa Dwan – who spent the

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<sup>47</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.7.

<sup>48</sup> Brockes.

<sup>49</sup> Dominic Cavendish, 'Gatz', *The Telegraph*, 14th June 2012, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9330203/Gatz-Noel-Coward-Theatre-review.html>> [accessed 6th March 2014].

<sup>50</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Gatz', *The Independent*, 14th June 2012, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/first-night-gatz-noel-coward-theatre-london-7849001.html>> [accessed 6th March 2014].

<sup>51</sup> *Not I/Footfalls/Rockaby*, Royal Court Theatre, 18th January 2014.

duration strapped into place, delivering the text at breakneck speed – while audience members were implicitly warned that experiencing this supposedly impenetrable piece of theatre would be difficult. Writing about this production at the time, I reflected that it encouraged audiences to attend ‘in an attitude of self-improvement’, and that it ‘soars above the fraught battleground between art and entertainment because it can be seen as a serious, hardworking endeavour for all involved’.<sup>52</sup> It was my argument that these echoes of ‘hard work’ and ‘self-improvement’, as opposed to the discourse of either art or entertainment, made the production acceptable to a political and economic system that struggles to comprehend the inner contradictions of theatre as a species of labour in which work, leisure and love commingle.

The same might be argued of the media coverage of *Gatz*, a production existing under similar conditions, yet as I have discussed ERS’s show contains in its very form an implicit challenge to the usual separation of work and not-work that neoliberal capitalism seeks to establish at the same time as it erodes. What is revealed in both cases is a paradoxical attitude towards work that sits at the heart of neoliberalism, and that has more specifically been cultivated under the staunchly neoliberal UK coalition government of the time. In a society divided sharply by media and politicians into ‘strivers’ and ‘shirkers’, it becomes imperative to fall into the former bracket, leading to defensive assertions of ‘hard work’ such as those seen around *Not I*. At the same time, however, we are being sold an ideal of flexible, rewarding labour, thereby suspending work and pleasure in an unresolvable tension. Meanwhile, the experience of audience members who attended *Gatz* – perhaps expecting the kind of hard work promised by commentators – adds another layer of contradiction. For some, no doubt, it presented a difficult watch, but for myself and others who saw the production the viewing experience invoked pleasure far more than it did labour. Although the show was long and at times slow-paced, requiring a certain effort of concentration, I also found it absorbing, oddly beautiful and often mesmerising, feelings that I was not alone in. Michael Billington writes of the show’s

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<sup>52</sup> Catherine Love, ‘Hard Work? Not I’, <<http://catherinelove.co.uk/2014/01/20/hard-work-not-i/>> [accessed 13th March 2014].

'total, transfixing fidelity';<sup>53</sup> Trueman observes that by the end 'One longs as much to be released as one does for it to continue onwards', acknowledging the complicated nature of the enjoyment involved as a spectator;<sup>54</sup> and Ben Brantley finds that time, rather than dragging, becomes suspended in the 'beautiful twilight zone' conjured by the production.<sup>55</sup>

By breaking or bending the usual patterns of work and leisure, and by reconfiguring the audience's position by demanding them to interrupt the temporal flow of their day, there is the possibility that *Gatz* may offer the kind of radical disruption to capitalist relations that is discussed at length by Ridout. His central suggestion is that theatre is a place where 'it might be possible to think disruptively about work and leisure'.<sup>56</sup> The theatre is a promising site for such disruptive thoughts not because it can offer a space outside of capitalism, 'but precisely because it usually nestles so deeply inside it,' particularly when we are considering a production such as *Gatz* being presented in the commercial heart of the West End.<sup>57</sup> It is one of the few places where work and leisure meet head-on, in the form of audience and performers, powerfully demonstrating the underlying truth that 'one person's leisure is always another's labour'.<sup>58</sup> In recognising this relationship of exchange, I would once again emphasise – along with the uneasiness that Ridout claims is to be found in our theatrical encounters – the experience of pleasure. The labour of others in the service of our basic needs is one thing, but paid work as the all-too-present instigator of pleasure is another altogether, stirring just the kind of uneasiness that Ridout diagnoses. This experience, which can arguably be found in *Gatz*, may then begin to resonate with the hidden inequalities and divisions of labour that persist in the world beyond the auditorium.

Ridout, meanwhile, argues that it is in the moments when the representational

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<sup>53</sup> Michael Billington, 'Gatz', *The Guardian*, 14th June 2012, <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jun/14/gatz-review>> [accessed 6th March 2014].

<sup>54</sup> Matt Trueman, 'Review: Gatz, Public Theatre, New York', <<http://matttrueman.co.uk/2010/11/review-gatz-public-theatre-new-york.html>> [accessed 6th March 2014].

<sup>55</sup> Ben Brantley, 'Borne Back Ceaselessly Into the Past', *The New York Times*, 6th October 2010, <[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/07/theater/reviews/07gatz.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/07/theater/reviews/07gatz.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)> [accessed 6th March 2014].

<sup>56</sup> Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs*, p.4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p.9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p.43.

machine stutters that the true nature of the theatre's transactional encounter is revealed; we in the audience are made aware of the economic relations at play, and are therefore prompted to think about wider divisions of work and leisure – categories which are of course always defined against one another. In *Gatz*, due to the production's unwieldy length, its deliberate displays of labour, and its multi-layered representational strategies, this experience is heightened. When discussing stage fright, one of the phenomena that he argues is capable of provoking those moments of economic revelation described above, Ridout explores the idea of the 'semiotic shudder', which he defines as a moment in which 'the audience has no way of knowing whether they are seeing an actor making themselves into a sign or an actor failing to do so'.<sup>59</sup> This idea can be interestingly applied to the representational uncertainty that persists throughout *Gatz*. It is never quite clear where performer ends and character begins, and the performance is punctuated with numerous moments where it is ambiguous whether or not certain performers have temporarily slipped out of character – and, indeed, whether or not these slips are intentional. This is characteristic of ERS's work; Bailes observes that performers 'often demonstrate the distance and inappropriateness of character in relation to the individual performer, as if the performer is engaged with showing two things: themselves playing themselves, and themselves as "other"'.<sup>60</sup> To complicate matters further, there is an additional layer of representation at play in *Gatz*, in which ERS's performers are playing generic office workers, who are then 'playing' the characters in the novel. Faced with such uncertainty, an audience is forced into multiple if fleeting confrontations with the divisions of labour that theatre usually seeks to obscure.

Before concluding, it would be disingenuous not to recognise myself as another ambiguous worker in this constellation of different forms of labour and leisure, work, not-work and not-not work. As a theatre critic and scholar, I might be classed alongside Ridout as a 'professional spectator': someone who, like the

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<sup>59</sup> Ridout, *Stage Fright*, p.60.

<sup>60</sup> Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, p.176.

'passionate amateurs' who form the subject of Ridout's latest book, 'does for a living what most people do mainly just for the love of it'.<sup>61</sup> When I attended *Gatz* in London I was a paying ticket holder and therefore ostensibly engaging in a leisure activity, but I later went on to write about the production under both journalistic and scholarly guises, locating me as an audience member somewhere awkwardly between the diligent labourer and the leisured spectator. It is necessary also to acknowledge my position within the academy, which can itself be seen as modelling the same ideal form of immaterial labour as that witnessed among creative workers. As Gill points out, the typical academic shares with the artist several characteristics of the model neoliberal subject: she is autonomous and self-disciplined, sees her work as a calling or passion, collapses distinctions between work and life, embraces flexible working structures, and is willing to put in extra hours, all combined with increasingly precarious patterns of employment.<sup>62</sup> In the context of the steady marketization of higher education in the UK, these qualities are all being progressively instrumentalised, placing scholars like myself no less front and centre in the labour shifts of neoliberal economies than the members of ERS. Ridout, however, raises the tentatively optimistic possibility that a disruption of the normal relations of capital might be achieved through the meeting of the passionate amateur – that is, in this instance, the theatre-maker – and the professional spectator, both simultaneously finding love in work. Existing in this ambiguous space between work and leisure, I am perhaps able to access an enhanced awareness of the division of labour in the space of the theatre – and beyond it.

Do we therefore understand ERS as passionate amateurs under Ridout's terms? In his book of the same name, Ridout posits this figure as one of potential resistance to the workings of capitalism, but we must be cautious about the radical possibility we invest in these ambiguous workers. As Ridout himself memorably puts it, 'If you can serve the man while convincing yourself that you are really fucking with the man, then you can count yourself really fucked'.<sup>63</sup> With this warning ringing in my

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<sup>61</sup> Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs*, p.140.

<sup>62</sup> Gill, 'Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia'.

<sup>63</sup> Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs*, p.114.

ears, I am doubtful about Hardt and Negri's claim that immaterial labour 'provide[s] the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism'. They locate this potential in the social interaction and cooperation that they claim is integral to immaterial labour as a new structure of work in neoliberal economies, drawing attention to 'linguistic, communicational, and affective networks'.<sup>64</sup> For a start, however, it remains unclear whether immaterial labour represents just another form of work or the epochal category that Hardt and Negri credit it with being; Harvey, for instance, remains unconvinced that the changes to labour processes and markets experienced under neoliberal capitalism constitute a 'new regime of accumulation'.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, while immaterial labour may certainly involve communication and affect, it also tends to be structured in such a way that it individualises and atomises workers as much as it brings them together in relationships of mutual dependency, weakening Hardt and Negri's claims for its communist potential. To return to *Gatz*, I want to contend that the promise of theatre in this mould lies instead in a mixture of complicity and rupture. ERS are both passionate amateurs *and* model labourers in a neoliberal economy, rendering their critique of capitalism internal and contingent, but powerful and necessary nonetheless.

Theatre has an inherently ambiguous and complex relationship with work. It is a site of leisure, an activity that audiences experience as being outside the structures of work, yet it is also an arena where work is – quite literally – put on show. In *Gatz*, ERS make a deliberate show of that work, at once offering a commentary on the values implicitly discussed in *The Great Gatsby*, a statement on the creative act of translating a work of art from one medium to another, and a critique of labour conditions under neoliberal capitalism. While it may be too much to hope that productions such as *Gatz* can offer a substantial challenge to existing socio-economic structures, ERS do prompt vital questions about the division and visibility of creative labour, and about working conditions both in the theatre industry and in the global neoliberal economy. Moreover, while there are of course far greater

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<sup>64</sup> Hardt and Negri, p.294.

<sup>65</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p.124.

injustices and inequalities present within global structures of labour than those illuminated by *Gatz*, I add my voice to Gill's when she calls this out as a silencing dynamic of its own, forbidding us to speak of anything but the worst suffering and thereby allowing the development of labour mechanisms with an impact that potentially reaches far further than theatre or academia to simply go ignored.<sup>66</sup> Through considering ERS's particular strategies of staging, therefore, we can begin to think usefully about the collective work involved in making theatre – and, by extension, about how to resist the normalisation of a form of immaterial labour that is increasingly characteristic of twenty-first-century work.

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<sup>66</sup> Gill, 'Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia'.

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