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Rantin and Raving: Kieran Hurley's Aesthetic Communities

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***Rantin* and Raving: Kieran Hurley's Aesthetic Communities**

Abstract

This article focusses on the formation of community in the performances of Glasgow-based playwright and performer, Kieran Hurley. In his debut play, *Hitch* (2009), Hurley hitchhikes through Europe to join protesters at the G8 summit in L'Aquila, Italy. This autobiographical narrative of travel and human connections seeks out new forms of political engagement for the twenty-first century. Hurley's work reflects and generates a mobile and relational engagement with the world: challenging isolationist trends through the enactment of contingent and temporary collectives. Following the political enquiry initiated by *Hitch*, and developed through three subsequent plays – *Beats* (2012), *Rantin* (2013) and *Heads Up* (2016) – this article examines the potential for theatre to work against societal separation by constructing and addressing *aesthetic communities* (Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2011). Rancière's aesthetic communities are dialectically formed, constructed through collective inhabitation of the 'sensory reality' presented by the artwork, and at the same time cognisant of the 'twisting together of sensations' that comprises any group. This dynamic is present in Hurley's performances, which address multiple collectives: the theatre audience; those engaged in political struggles encountered and recounted through his stories; and ultimately, an aspirational political community in the making.

Key Words

audience, collective, community, political theatre, Scottish theatre

Introduction

‘Hello’, the Scottish playwright-performer, Kieran Hurley, greets his audience in an early version of his 2016 performance, *Heads Up*.¹ ‘Thank you for being here, at this time. In these times’.²

This article traces a journey through eight years of Hurley’s work: a theatre of, and for, ‘these times’ of seismic political shifts, missed democratic opportunities, and creeping isolationism. The journey begins quite literally with the 2009 play, *Hitch*, which recounts the author’s hitchhike through Europe the previous year, to join protesters at the G8 summit in L’Aquila, Italy.³ For David Archibald, this autobiographical narrative of travel and human connections directly explores ‘what it means to be politically engaged in the twenty-first century’.⁴ I want to follow the political enquiry that *Hitch* sets in motion, as it alters its course through three subsequent plays (*Beats* (2012), *Rantin* (2013) and *Heads Up* (2016)).⁵ These performances reflect, and generate, a mobile and relational engagement with the world, challenging isolationist trends in contemporary British life through the enactment of contingent and temporary collectives. A radical and urgent voice has now emerged, which finds its form in the end-of-the-world narrative of *Heads Up*: the inevitability of an apocalyptic point of actual and political explosion that screams ‘this has to stop’.⁶

¹ Kieran Hurley, *Heads Up*, dir. by Alex Swift and Julia Taudevin, Show and Tell, Summerhall, Edinburgh, 3-28 August 2016.

² Kieran Hurley, *Heads Up* (unpublished rehearsal script, 2016).

³ Kieran Hurley, *Hitch*, dir. by Dick Bonham, Jamie Fletcher, Kieran Hurley and Julia Taudevin, the Arches, Glasgow, September 2009. I have noted the context elsewhere: ‘in June 2009, the 35th G8 summit took place in L’Aquila in Central Italy. Leaders of the world’s richest nations came together in a city that had recently been devastated by an earthquake – a last-minute change of venue that brought heavy criticism of opportunism against Silvio Berlusconi’s government. A high level of activism surrounded the event and many travelled to L’Aquila to protest in solidarity with local people against a range of issues from climate change to nuclear policy’ (David Overend, ‘Making Routes: Relational Journeys in Contemporary Performance’, *Studies in Theatre & Performance*, 33. 3 (2013), 365–381 (p. 374)).

⁴ David Archibald, ‘History in Contemporary Scottish Theatre’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama*, ed. by Ian Brown (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 85-94 (p. 94).

⁵ Kieran Hurley, *Beats*, dir. Kieran Hurley and Julia Taudevin, the Arches, Glasgow, 25-28 April 2012; Kieran Hurley, *Rantin*, dir. Kieran Hurley, the Arches and the National Theatre of Scotland, Cottiers, Glasgow, 17-19 April 2013.

⁶ Hurley, *Heads Up*, (London: Oberon, 2017), p. 27.

In their introduction to a recent collection on *Twenty-First Century Drama*, Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage identify ‘new dramatic trends, characteristics, paradigms and formal developments’ that have emerged in contemporary theatre in response to significant local and global political events.⁷ In the UK, these encompass an ‘increasing pressure on parliamentary democracy, its perceived efficacy and fairness, and the far-reaching implications of the tumultuous election results in Scotland’.⁸ That this list now also includes Britain’s vote to leave the European Union, the election of Donald Trump as leader of the free world, and the very real threat of far-right power gains across Europe, Latin America and Australasia, reveals both the inextricably global context for ‘British’ drama, and the precariousness through which our democratic systems currently operate. Against a global backdrop of migrant crises and accelerating climate change, questions of power and agency have become more urgent and pressing, and contemporary theatre has responded directly, often tackling these issues head on.

Hurley’s work is part of a tradition of twenty-first century Scottish theatre that eschews an implicit social critique in favour of a passionate, explicit and unambiguous call for a new political paradigm. As Trish Reid suggests, this work has made its impact by encouraging an ‘immediate sense of civic responsibility and engagement’.⁹ Many of these performances emerged in the last decade at the recently-closed Arches arts centre in Glasgow.¹⁰ When Jackie Wylie was promoted to Artistic

⁷ Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage, ‘Introduction: What Happens Now?’, in *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now?*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-15 (p. 3).

⁸ Ibid. Adiseshiah and LePage refer to the 2015 general election in which 56 out of 59 Scottish MPs were Scottish Nationalist Party members.

⁹ Trish Reid, “‘Sexy Kilts with Attitude’: Scottish Theatre in the Twenty-First Century”, in *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now?*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 191-212 (p. 205).

¹⁰ On 10th June 2015, the Arches closed its doors, following a decision by Glasgow Licensing Board to curtail licensed hours ‘effectively preventing the organisation from continuing its very successful and popular programme of club nights’ (the Arches, ‘Press Release: The Arches “Left with no other Choice” than to go into Administration’ (10 June 2015), www.thearches.co.uk/news/2015/06/press-release-the-arches-left-with-no-other-choice-than-to-go-into-administration [accessed 18 February 2017]). This decision led to the appointment of administrators for both the Arches’ Theatre and Retail Companies, and brought an end to 25 years of cultural activity at the site. Unexpectedly, a venue that had been at the heart of Glasgow’s regeneration and growth since 1990 was wiped off the cultural map, and a strong tradition of anti-establishment artistic practice was abolished through what Hurley referred to as a ‘ridiculous and short-sighted decision on the part of the council’ (Kieran Hurley, ‘The Arches in Glasgow is the Hampden Park of Nightclubs – Shut it and Scottish Arts will Suffer’, *The Guardian*

Director in 2008, she ushered in a new generation of Scottish theatre makers working in the wake of the global financial crisis. In 2011, Clare Duffy's *Money: the Game Show* and Gary McNair's *Crunch* explored this context directly, inviting the audience into a playful deconstruction of the belief systems of the financial markets and riling against complicity in its dominance and inherent inequalities.¹¹ As the political landscape shifted, Arches artists took aim at the politicians who had bequeathed this situation to them: Gary Gardiner's *Thatcher's Children* (2012) and Nic Green's *Cock and Bull* (2015) rejected conservative ideologies and sound-bite politics with anarchic cabaret, satirical masks and gold paint.¹² As the debate on Scottish independence intensified in 2014, the Arches programmed a series of performances and events around Rob Drummond's *Wallace*; commissioned by the National Theatre of Great Britain and produced by the Arches as a work-in-development, which evolved significantly to become *The Majority* three years later.¹³

These works were often conceived and developed under the artistic vision of an individual theatre maker, who could combine multiple roles; often working as director, writer and performer in the same production. The Arches' Platform 18 Award, and the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) co-produced Auteurs Project, encouraged and supported this model of theatre making, which responded to a shift away from 'artists coming together to form companies with clearly delineated roles'.¹⁴ As an artist supported by both schemes, Hurley was a key figure in this movement towards a theatre of individual authorship. While this work is often characterised by political provocation and occasionally direct polemic, it is also frequently concerned with questions of community and nation building. That so many of these performances are created by 'auteurs', rather than 'companies', suggests a

Theatre Blog, 18 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2015/may/18/arches-glasgow-shut-scottish-arts [accessed 18 February 2017].

¹¹ Clare Duffy, *Money: the Gameshow*, dir. Clare Duffy, the Arches, Glasgow, 5-9 April 2011; Gary McNair *Crunch*, dir. Gary McNair, the Arches, Glasgow, 31 Jan 2011.

¹² Gary Gardiner, *Thatcher's Children*, dir. Gary Gardiner, 18-22 April 2012; Nic Green, *Cock and Bull* [scratch performance], dir. Nic Green, the Arches, Glasgow, 6 May 2015.

¹³ Rob Drummond, *Wallace*, dir. Rob Drummond and David Overend, National Theatre of Great Britain at the Arches, Glasgow, 14-18 Sep 2014; Rob Drummond, *The Majority*, dir. David Overend, National Theatre of Great Britain, 10-28 August 2017.

¹⁴ The Arches, Platform 18: New Directions Award, www.thearches.co.uk/events/arts/platform-18-award-2014 [accessed 2 November 2017]; National Theatre of Scotland, Auteurs Project, www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/content/default.asp?page=home_AuteursProject [accessed 2 November 2017].

paradox. As I will argue, it is in the dynamic between the individual artist and the multiple communities enacted through performance, that a progressive politics emerges. However, a tension emerges through this relationship that resists resolution and problematises the connection between politics and aesthetics.

Hitch is the first of a trilogy produced by the Arches; the second, *Beats*, is a coming-of-age tale that unfolds against the backdrop of 90s rave culture and the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, which outlawed public gatherings characterised by ‘repetitive beats’; and the third, *Rantin*, co-produced by NTS as part of the Auteurs Project, extends the Scottish ceilidh play into the twenty-first century through a fragmented vision of contemporary Scotland. More recently, *Heads Up* explores a multiplicity of lives and stories in an unnamed city, converging around a cataclysmic event. This article considers the multiple communities addressed by these four performances, as they are brought into a productive dialogue with each other: the theatre audience; those engaged in political struggles, encountered and recounted through his stories; and ultimately, an aspirational political collective in the making.

Numerous individual characters, including the author, are introduced in these narrative-driven performances: Hurley, as a 23-year-old activist, hitchhiking his way south through Europe; a 15-year-old in his new mate’s car on his way to his first rave; a retired American flying ‘home’ over the Atlantic to Scotland; a coked-up pop-star speeding his Porsche towards his daughter’s birth. These stories add up to something, and like the refrain in *Beats* – ‘it doesn’t mean nothing’ – the message seems to be that we can only really move forward – politically, personally and socially – by negotiating our relationship to each other.

In Hurley’s theatre, a collective engagement with contemporary politics – buoyed on and invigorated by the 2014 Scottish independence referendum – is now finding new forms, strategies and stories to confront a perceived crisis of relationality. These plays suggest the potential for theatre to work against societal separation by constructing what Jacques Rancière calls *aesthetic communities*.¹⁵ This is no harmonious vision of

¹⁵ Jacques Rancière, ‘Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community’, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 51-82.

togetherness. Rancière identifies a complex relationship between the aesthetics of *community* and *separation*; a ‘tension between being together and being apart’.¹⁶ In these plays, the process of forging common goals and making communal progress is experienced as a struggle, and as Reid points out, ‘the production of community involves actual labour’.¹⁷ Through this process, Hurley moves from the autobiographical subjectivity of the (self-consciously) naïve protagonist to the agency of the emancipated spectator – watching, almost willing, as the world implodes, but holding out for the possibility of us building it back again.

In the majority of Hurley’s work, the audience-community do not literally move, excepting the perpetual micro-mobility of the stationary human body. Rather, they sit in chairs in an auditorium (or, in the case of some audience members for *Rantin*, on cushions around the performers). But Hurley creates journeys in the performance space: the illusion and promise of momentum. Sometimes the mobility of the characters productively jars with the stasis of the auditorium. Sometimes solidarity and political enlightenment prompt future journeys. Sometimes we are encouraged to stay still and to think about the world we live in and our place within it. These performances ask us where we want to be, and to consider the best way of getting there. Rejecting the assumption that seated, silent audiences are necessarily *passive*, Rancière posits an active role comprised of observation, selection, comparison and interpretation.¹⁸ Presented with a simultaneity of narratives, Hurley’s audiences are encouraged into this active relationship with performance.

Rancière’s aesthetic communities are dialectically formed, constructed through collective inhabitation of the ‘sensory reality’ presented by the artwork, and at the same time cognisant of the ‘twisting together of sensations’ that comprises any human collective.¹⁹ But art also has the capacity to address the community of the future:

The artistic ‘voice of the people’ is the voice of a people to come. The people to come is the impossible people which, at one and the same time,

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 58.

¹⁷ Reid, “Sexy Kilts with Attitude”, p. 205.

¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator”, in *Artforum International* 45:7 (2007), 271-80 (p. 277).

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 57-56.

would be the divided people of protest and the collective harmony of a people in tune with the very breath of nature.²⁰

This sets up a dialogue between the present and future; a way of being together here and now, that yet ‘stands as a mediation or a substitute for a people to come’.²¹ In this sense, art operates through anticipation of its potential realisation.

Like any community, the theatre audience is a temporary and heterogeneous grouping; a collection of ‘individuals who bring their own cultural reference points, political beliefs, sexual preferences, personal histories, and immediate preoccupations to their interpretation of a production’.²² Moreover, as Helen Freshwater points out, ‘these differences are present within individuals as well as among them’.²³ The theatre audience, then, exists in a state of tension between ‘being apart’ and ‘being together’. In Rancière’s terms, this condition is experienced as a rupturing of the link between present and future; cause and effect; an ‘impossibility’ to be grappled with. The audience-community is a community-in-progress; a collective in a state of becoming, which Rancière sees as ‘structured by disconnection’.²⁴

Hurley’s performances acknowledge and address the audience as ‘impossible people’: a transitory, incomplete and disconnected community. In this way, they advocate an ongoing engagement with the impossibility of togetherness; a way of being in the world that requires an active relationship with various forms of community, ‘viewing tolerance, or the accommodation of difference, as a set of everyday practices, rather than as a moral virtue’.²⁵ Through his aesthetic engagement with the productive impossibility of human collectives, Hurley recognises in contemporary performance the potential for political efficacy. We travel with a potentially unreachable destination in mind, but the important thing is what we can achieve together on the way there.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 57.

²¹ Ibid. p. 59.

²² Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 6.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 59.

²⁵ Trish Reid, “‘Sexy Kilts with Attitude’: Scottish Theatre in the Twenty-First Century”, in *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now?*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 191-212 (p. 205).

Hitch

In *Hitch*, the call to action in other public spheres beyond the theatre is a central concern. This solo performance is accompanied by documentary footage on a projection screen above the stage, and begins as a nervous young activist sets off alone from his home in Glasgow.²⁶ The narrative then follows Hurley's journey as he hitchhikes south through Europe, and ends in L'Aquila where he finally becomes one with the crowd of protesters. The perspective afforded by this mode of travel provides a fleeting insight into a mosaic of modern European lives. For Jonathan Purkis, hitchhiking offers 'an ideal method for observing the workings of power and hierarchy, since these often define the respective positions and attitudes of lift seeker and giver'.²⁷ Following the 'roadside ethnography' of the journey, Hurley's arrival in Italy is framed by a series of meaningful encounters with strangers:

We've come as far as we can go. We've reached the wall of police at the L'Aquila red zone. The helicopters overhead are lower now. Their rhythmic mechanical pulsing fills the air. But we don't care. We breathe and move together. We are pushed back, we sway. I feel a stranger's hand grip my shoulder and pull me back up. We raise our hands in peace. We raise our voices in song. And slowly, I step further, and further into the crowd.²⁸

This autobiographical passage alternates between the experience of the individual and that of the community, as Hurley negotiates his position in the crowd and ultimately gives himself over to it, culminating in a physical and political movement forward. This is a transition into the 'impossible people', who in this case are literally 'the divided people of protest'.²⁹ But in the

²⁶ In the original performance, Hurley shared the stage with the Scottish band Over the Wall, and therefore performed as part of an onstage community of performers. This was also a key part of *Rantin* (which included one of the same collaborators). The touring production of *Hitch* was a solo performance with a pre-recorded soundtrack.

²⁷ Jonathan Purkis, 'The Hitchhiker as Theorist: Rethinking Sociology and Anthropology from an Anarchist Perspective', in *The Continuum Companion to Anarchism*, ed. by Ruth Kinna (New York: Continuum, 2012), pp. 140-161 (p. 142).

²⁸ Kieran Hurley, *Hitch* (unpublished play script, 2009; available at the Live Art Development Agency Study Room, London), p. 45.

²⁹ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 57.

physical gesture of raising hands and the vocal gesture of song, this newly formed community enacts ‘collective harmony’.³⁰

As Reid notes in her own discussion of *Hitch*, written prior to the creation of *Heads Up*, questions about collective action recur throughout Hurley’s performances:

[*Hitch*] deals, with intelligence and subtlety, with a number of themes that are of striking relevance, particularly for young people. Like *Rantin* it is about, among other things, the challenges of becoming politically engaged in an increasingly confused world; the remarkable kindness of strangers; the hesitancy one inevitably feels in a world that seems overwhelmingly large; and how one might connect with others and consequently make a meaningful contribution.³¹

The relational concerns of Hurley’s work are clear in this appraisal: political engagement, meetings with strangers and connecting with others. Frequently, these moments of meaning occur in moments of transition (often literally in transit). And it is the potential afforded by moving through specific political landscapes that allows Hurley, and his characters, to reassess and reposition themselves within the contexts of global events and local impacts. The first stranger that Hurley meets during his journey to Italy suggests otherwise, dismissing protest marches as ‘really just a big walk from A down to B, and then home again for tea’.³² But the communities that Hurley encounters and creates, and the audience-community that he addresses in the theatre, are endowed with so much more than that.

In Rancière’s terms, *Hitch* serves as a ‘monument’ to the future community that is sought through Hurley’s solitary journey to L’Aquila. The sensory reality of his hitchhiking, narrated through the performance text, stands in relation to the assembled community of the audience, which is brought into a relationship with ‘a new sensory fabric’ created by the work.³³ For Rancière, this is how aesthetic community operates, as art ‘creat[es] a form of common expression or a form of expression of the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Trish Reid, ‘Introduction’ to *Contemporary Scottish Plays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. ix-xix (p. xviii).

³² Hurley, *Hitch*, p. 14.

³³ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 55.

community – namely, “the earth’s song and the cry of humanity”³⁴. This may seem to claim too much, but in Hurley’s guttural screams that punctuate the narrative sections of the performance, the ‘cry of humanity’ does not seem farfetched as a description – it is a desperate longing for something better; something in tune with forces of nature.

The phrase is Deleuze and Guattari’s. It refers to the aspiration and ultimate goal of art, which directs the struggle of humanity towards the pursuit of revolution and ‘the vibrations, clinches, and openings’ that are offered along the way.³⁵ This is the constant ‘process of becoming’ through which art enacts its political intervention.³⁶ By the end of *Hitch*, after struggling with loneliness, solitude and separation, Hurley appears to have reached a ‘community of solidarity’, and the moment of revolution is made reachable as the ‘divided people of protest’ move further towards ‘collective harmony’.³⁷ With the final words of the performance, Hurley walks forward into the future; the impossible people ‘raise our voices in song’; and ‘slowly, I step further, and further into the crowd’.³⁸

Beats

It is not surprising that Hurley’s search for communal meaning, and the transformative potential of the crowd, soon leads him to explore raving and club culture. Where better than the dynamic, unified and ecstatic sensations of hundreds of dancing bodies, to seek out Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘earth’s song and the cry of humanity’? Hurley discusses ‘unfinished business’ after *Hitch* ‘about the value and purpose of gatherings, and particularly gatherings of youth en masse, and about how that might be radical, even when it’s not framed in a particularly radical way’.³⁹ Locating this ongoing enquiry in the subculture of the 1990s rave scene was an opportunity to interrogate a tangible conflict between the regulating powers of the State and the subversive potential of community. The context of the Criminal Justice

³⁴ Ibid. p. 56.

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 177.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 57.

³⁸ Hurley, *Hitch*, p. 45.

³⁹ Kieran Hurley (unpublished interview, London, 2012).

and Public Order Bill is established in an early scene of *Beats*, as a group of young people drive to an illegal gathering late at night:

What they are trying to do yeah is outlaw raves. Criminalise the party scene yeah. So what they're saying they want to do is make it illegal to have a big outdoor party with, and this is a quote, music characterised wholly or predominantly by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats. Yeah?⁴⁰

The Criminal Justice Act was influenced and supported by a common trope in early clubbing theory to portray a hedonistic space that is completely separated from everyday life.⁴¹ But for fifteen-year-old Johnno McCreadie, travelling to his first rave, 'everyday life' is 'bitumen pavements. And dog shit [...] a dreich evening, a row of hedges, in orange sulphur streetlight'.⁴² In contrast, a new track by the techno band Autechre, playing on the car stereo - cleverly subverting the new laws by using no repetitive beats whatsoever - represents a completely new level of 'meaning and aesthetic sensibility' that will change the world, and his place within it, forever:

A living pulse. He focuses on that soft repetitive melody, and he stares at his own shady reflection in the window he begins to imagine that melody as his own living pulse. Visualising it like liquid flowing through his veins. And he imagines it as the living pulse of the tarmac, and the electricity pylons that flick past his eyes keeping time. And of the streaky beads of rain catching and refracting the sparkle of passing headlights as they slide along the window, clinging on to the glass for dear life.⁴³

Hurley performs this story simply and directly, using only a table and microphone. But he is also accompanied on stage by the former Arches' resident DJ – Johnny Whoop – who enhances and highlights the patterns and shifts of the narrative using tracks by The Orb, Aphex Twin, and the aforementioned Autechre, among others. The stage is lit by moving club lighting that slices through a haze effect; and a VJ live

⁴⁰ Kieran Huley, *Beats* (London: Oberon, 2013), p. 31.

⁴¹ Antonio Melechi calls clubbing a 'fantasy of liberation' (Antonio Melechi, 'The Ecstasy of Disappearance' in *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*, ed. by Steve Redhead (Aldershot: Avebury, 1993), pp. 29-40 (p. 37); and Jean Baudrillard argues that nothing is a better signifier of the 'complete disappearance of a culture of meaning and aesthetic sensibility [than] a spinning of strobe lights and gyroscopes streaking the space whose moving pedestal is created by the crowd' (Jean Baudrillard, 'The Beaubourg Effect: Implosion and Deterrence', *October* 20, 1982, 3-13 (p. 5).

⁴² Hurley, *Beats*, p. 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 32.

mixes images that are either entirely abstract, or loosely correspond to the narrative. While *Beats* feels like a one-man monologue, it is executed with technical precision by a team of three. This allows the unfolding performance text to emulate the dramaturgical ‘rise and fall’ of a rave and a come down. The story builds through the exposition of ‘everyday’ Livingstone, follows Johnno’s release as he travels to the rave, builds through the event itself and its crashing climax in an instance of police brutality, and then returns us to a radically altered ‘everyday’.

The raving environment encountered by Johnno – and by extension the audience – is exemplary of the ‘political subjectivation’ engendered by such fleeting instances of communal dissent.⁴⁴ Operating against a rigid and dominating State power, the subversive power of the rave allows a realignment of power dynamics which carries with it ‘a new topography of the possible’.⁴⁵ Rancière explains the impulse in ‘critical art’ – exemplified by Brecht’s epic theatre – to claim a straightforward relationship between its ‘political aims’ and ‘artistic means’.⁴⁶ This connection remains unresolved in Hurley’s work, and the tensions between separation and togetherness are kept alive as a productive force.

At the level of individual dissent, the setting and subject of *Beats* is particularly fertile ground for this exploration. As Ben Malbon suggests, clubbing can be usefully conceptualised as a place of fluctuations, with the clubber moving between connection and separation from each other and their wider environment.⁴⁷ These spaces and practices are therefore constituted through a complex set of relationships between resistance and submission, inclusion and exclusion, involvement and separation. These dynamics and tensions are at the core of *Beats*, and indeed Hurley’s entire oeuvre, as the shifting relationship between individuals and collectives is played out in various ways. This is further explored in both *Hitch* and *Beats* through the metaphor of the motorway – a flow of people moving forward at once with a necessary separation and an unavoidable connection.

⁴⁴ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 49.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 74.

⁴⁷ Ben Malbon, *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy and Vitality* (London: Routledge, 1999).

For Hurley, '*Hitch* and *Beats* tell the same story [...] a young naïve protagonist having a coming-of-age experience over the course of a journey, from which they come back changed'.⁴⁸ In *Beats*, a literal journey is used as a means of transporting Johnno 'out of the comfort zone' of small-town Scotland into the vast, unfathomable world of rave culture. As with the autobiographical journey in *Hitch*, the narrative follows a formative experience of 'stepping out of that threshold into something wider and bigger'. Ultimately, for both young protagonists, 'change is effected within them somehow, in terms of their relationship with their own position in the world'. Both protagonists move from a position of isolation to encounter a new social dynamic engendered by the fleeting togetherness of protest. Importantly, this contingency is avowed, and in the return from this temporary collective condition, a claim is made for the centrality of the politicised individual moving in and out of temporary 'scenes of dissensus'.⁴⁹ As a solo performer, Hurley embodies this position, at once connected and apart from the crowd; enacting a series of fluctuations. This dynamic is scaled up in Hurley's subsequent works, which explore the communal aesthetics of cities and states.

Rantin

If *Hitch* and *Beats* can be considered as explorations of individual protagonists (real and imagined) and their changing relationship to the world around them, in *Rantin*, Hurley turned his attention to the construction of the nation state at a time when Scotland was being redefined and reconstituted. At the same time, *Rantin* more directly includes the community of theatre-goers sharing the space. For Reid, *Rantin* seeks 'to enact a robustly convivial version of community', which adopts the traditions of Scottish gatherings in which communities come together to share music, dance and stories. This is emphasised by Hurley in his prologue to the published script, in which he explains 'it is important to think of the audience as a vital part of the event. In the spirit of a *ceilidh* you should all feel very much like you are sharing the same space'.⁵⁰ *Rantin* is a contemporary take on the 'ceilidh-play', and begins

⁴⁸ Hurley, unpublished interview.

⁴⁹ Ranci re, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 49.

⁵⁰ Kieran Hurley, 'Rantin', in *Contemporary Scottish Plays*, ed. by Trish Reid (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 305-354 (p. 309).

with an invitation – a stage strewn with cushions and the homely aesthetic of a ‘cosy living room gathering’.⁵¹ Hurley greets individual audience members as they arrive in the theatre, inviting some to take a seat at floor level at the edge of the performance space. Reid makes much of this atmosphere, arguing that ‘both the setting and set up for *Rantin* are convivial in the sense that they invite people to take time, get affected by the environment and co-create the space and situation for togetherness to happen’.⁵²

Reid’s description of this piece captures the informal aesthetic of the set up, but also the identity politics that soon begin to emerge from this convivial context:

Drawing on Scottish folk traditions in music and storytelling and on current events, *Rantin* is performed in a relaxed and welcoming ceilidh atmosphere, and in form, although perhaps not in content, it echoes the radical traditions of Scottish theatre in the 1970s, particularly the work of John McGrath with 7:84 Scotland and its seminal production, *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* (1973). *Rantin* does not touch directly on the independence referendum but it offers a timely examination of contemporary Scottish identity. At its heart the show consists in a series of monologues in which characters offer contrasting interpretations of what it means to be Scottish.⁵³

Through song and monologue, four musician-performers offer a series of encounters with a wide range of characters, in very different relationships with Scotland. Hurley explains at the start of the performance, ‘as we tell these stories we’d like you to imagine that they are happening in Scotland, right now outside this theatre, as we speak’.⁵⁴ And as his co-performer, Drew Wright, adds ‘there’s no central character here, just some imagined ideas of different people, with different stories, perspectives, next to each other trying to co-exist’. This approach stands in contrast to what Reid identifies as ‘a significant tranche of contemporary theatre [that] focusses on conflict, on ruptures and discontinuities in social, ethical, political sexual and economic relations’.⁵⁵ *Rantin*, on the other hand, makes an assumption of, and advocates for,

⁵¹ National Theatre of Scotland, ‘Rantin’, www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/content/default.asp?page=home_Rantin [accessed 18 February 2017].

⁵² Reid, “Sexy Kilts with Attitude”, p. 203.

⁵³ Reid, *Contemporary Scottish Plays*, p. xvii.

⁵⁴ Hurley, ‘Rantin’, p. 312.

⁵⁵ Reid, “Sexy Kilts with Attitude”, p. 204, 205. Reid gives the example of Rona Munro’s *The James Plays* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2014).

‘fellow feeling’, both in the co-existence of the narratives, and in the relationship that it sets up with the audience.

As Howard, a 67-year-old Nebraskan, flies into Prestwick Airport – his first visit to Scotland, the place of a deep ancestral affinity – he is unaware of the vertigo-inducing plurality of ‘contrasting interpretations of what it means to be Scottish in 2014’:⁵⁶ among others, ‘a young man crossing the water on a boat leaving an island’, ‘a small boy, who runs through the streets of Govanhill, singing’, ‘a schoolgirl who, at this moment, walks towards a supermarket with a golfclub in her hand’, ‘a venture capitalist in Edinburgh surveying the people below’, and ‘a drunk man on the coast, having a moment of clarity, or was it delusion, as a stranger teaches him that all things are connected, all our futures are shared, and each of us has our part to play’.⁵⁷ The portrayal of Howard carries a certain playful irony, captured in his homesickness the second he leaves the plane into the ‘dreich’ West coast air.⁵⁸ But his attempts to ‘see himself as part of a story’ is offered without judgement, a desire that might be shared by all of us: ‘to be part of something bigger than himself’.⁵⁹

It is no coincidence that *Rantin* was commissioned and produced in 2013, the year preceding the referendum on Scottish independence. As Reid suggests, ‘*Rantin* is very much focussed on the present moment and consequently on the opportunities and risks, aspirations and frustrations that are at the forefront of the minds of everyone who had a vote in the upcoming referendum’.⁶⁰ This was a period in Scottish politics that was characterised by a gradual increase in public involvement in the independence campaigns. In this particular political context, the tensions between being apart and being together played out on a national scale.

For Reid, ‘only through honest self-reflection, a commitment to understanding a range of perspectives, a healthy dose of self-depreciation, and having a good old sing-song, *Rantin* suggests, can Scotland begin to understand where it is and where it might be

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 204.

⁵⁷ Hurley, ‘Rantin’, pp. 351-352.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 352.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 353.

⁶⁰ Reid, “Sexy Kilts with Attitude”, p. 203.

going'.⁶¹ Thus, in a disconcerting foreshadowing of more recent democratic results, an elderly lady looks out of her kitchen window in Balmedie, Aberdeen, at the site of one of Donald Trump's new International Golf Link courses, as 'she thinks to herself, fit like is that Trump? I'd throttle him'.⁶² The audience are then treated to Wright's humorous reworking of a well-known Scottish song: 'I've just flown in from the USA / I'm rich and I always get my way / But all I ever hear you say is / Donald You're a Loser!'.⁶³ When I watched this performance at the Cottiers in Glasgow in the first half of 2013, blissfully unaware of Trump's impending rise to political dominance, the audience joined in with gusto. Perhaps this moment rested too comfortably in its 'togetherness', unattuned to the political tensions and countercurrents that moved the Left towards the ironic complacency of melancholy, and gave way to the 'frenzy' of right wing critique of democratic individualism.⁶⁴ Rancière sees in this dichotomy an ineffective disavowal of critical thought.

Referendums offer the permanence of a binary choice, and both respond to and generate the rigidity of division. This can lead to antagonism, fuelled and solidified by the divisive rhetoric of politicians and media. Alternatively, unity can be carefully negotiated as autonomous individuals come together for a shared cause, whilst recognising the contingency of their temporary community. In this sense, coalescence around shared objectives can be a positive social force.⁶⁵ Félix Guattari proposes such a model for social change, through which individuals can come together with unified objectives whilst retaining their unique, singular existence, and always with the possibility of 'pulling out' from the collective aims of the community. Rancière takes up this call for temporary 'scenes of dissensus', in which 'the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities' is perpetually reconfigured.⁶⁶ This is the model of political unity on offer in Hurley's theatre, which presents a vision of community that is perpetually being redrawn and reconfigured at its edges.

⁶¹ Reid, "Sexy Kilts with Attitude", p. 205.

⁶² Hurley, 'Rantin'. p. 320.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 40.

⁶⁵ Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: Athlone Press, 2008), p. 34.

⁶⁶ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 49.

Rancière argues that aesthetic experience constitutes ‘a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are “equipped” to adapt to it’.⁶⁷ It therefore offers the possibility of reconfiguration: ‘new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation’. However, because of the disjunction between the political aspirations of art, and the means by which its aims can be achieved, the audience enters a state of dis-identification from the political community. Thereby, if ‘fellow feeling’ connects the audience of *Rantin* with the imagined people of Hurley’s multiple narratives, it is a fractured, unresolved relationship with the outcomes and intentions of this aesthetic community.

The debate about independence at this time often addressed the complex multiplicity of ways ‘to be Scottish’, and *Rantin* pre-empted this process of national soul searching by painting a fragmented, multiple and contradictory picture of national identity, just as ‘indyref’ began to gain traction in the popular imagination. While Hurley later emerged as a passionate and articulate public supporter of independence, *Rantin* avoided taking a partisan position and instead, like much of the theatre related to the referendum, did not assume an explicit allegiance with either side, thereby holding the issues open for continued debate.⁶⁸ This was, in the varied senses of the word, a time for rantin.

Howard’s Scottish phrase book, which he periodically returns to throughout his flight, offers conflicting definitions of the titular phrase: ‘Rant: verb; to frolic, romp, revel. Noun; a merrymaking, rough frolic, a lively song of joy [...] Ranter: verb; to sew a seam across roughly, to darn coarsely, to join, to attempt to reconcile statements which do not tally [...] Rantin: noun; a noisy mirth, a celebration’.⁶⁹ Rough seaming; coarse darning and the attempt to reconcile; but with joy, noise and mirth. In *Rantin*, against the creative and (relatively) positive context of the independence campaigns, Hurley demonstrates how theatre can function as ‘both an expression of anger and a

⁶⁷ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 72.

⁶⁸ Laura Bissell and David Overend, ‘Early Days: Reflections on the Performance of a Referendum’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 25:2 (2015), 242-250.

⁶⁹ Hurley, ‘Rantin’, p. 351, 353.

song of joy all at once'.⁷⁰ But his latest production, *Heads Up*, embraces a direct, passionate polemic in a very different political climate.

Heads Up

Heads Up was produced over three years after *Rantin* and represents a shift in the Scottish cultural response to national and global politics: the Left's unconditional embrace of Nationalism, as a neat ideological model for hopes of egalitarianism, looks less assured; the much-touted suggestion that the Eurosceptic Unionists had somehow 'lost' despite the No vote, does not seem so evident;⁷¹ and the populist rhetoric of a post-Brexit, Trumpian world-order make it harder to hope that any real change, or challenge, is possible. This production, which Lyn Gardner evocatively described as 'a quiet hurricane blowing through the city', confronts this situation directly.⁷²

Heads Up combines the minimal aesthetic of *Beats* (Hurley sitting alone at a table with a microphone, and in this case an audio sampler) with the multiple narrative structure of *Rantin*. We are introduced to four seemingly unrelated characters; each struggling through their own personal crises, which speak in different ways to the anxieties and pressures of contemporary life: economic; bureaucratic; mediated and technological. Each of these characters is narrated in the second person, thereby blurring the boundaries between the communities of the artwork and the audience: *you* are Abdullah, smoking cannabis to cope with the savage monotony of customer service; *you* are Ash, the twelve year old cyber-bullying victim seeking solace in toilet cubicles and computer games; *you* are Léon, the cocaine-hoovering pop-star vainly searching for another humanitarian project as his girlfriend goes into labour; and *you* are Mercy, the 'high-priestess' of the markets, whose trade in Futures leads to a prophecy of the end.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Laura Bissell and David Overend, 'Early Days: Reflections on the Performance of a Referendum' [film], *Contemporary Theatre Review Interventions* (February 2015), <<http://www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2015/early-days/>> [accessed 3 December 2017].

⁷² Lyn Gardner, 'Heads Up at Edinburgh festival review – news from the end of the world', in *The Guardian* (5 August 2016), www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/aug/05/heads-up-review-summerhall-edinburgh-kieran-hurley [accessed 20 February 2017].

In different ways, these characters are all experiencing a crisis in relationality: the models of human connection provided to them by a capitalist society prove inadequate and destructive and lead to disenchantment, victimisation and isolation. But underlying these personalised dramas, a more powerful and all-encompassing force is building in the background. It is foreshadowed in Ash's self-destruction of her Sim City game, as she unleashes a 'godzilla thing' on her carefully constructed town; and in a 3am documentary on the fall of the Roman Empire watched by Abdullah; it is noticed at various points as 'a weird smell in the air'; as 'a tiny buzzing in your ears'; and as 'imperceptible irregularities in the markets'.⁷³ But Mercy is first to understand its significance as 'Something fundamental. Something that means we can't just carry on'.⁷⁴ This is an impending event that has the ferocity of a nuclear bomb, but is, in many ways, more metaphysical than that. Mercy easily transfers from predicting market changes from the twenty-second floor of an office block, to prophesising doom on the streets below.

The constant use of second person leads to a script peppered with implicit messages to the audience – snippets of text buried within the unfolding narratives of the individual characters ('being apart') but directly addressing the assembled audience and everyone beyond ('being together'). This is particularly evident in the series of staff 'rules' in the high-street coffee shop that structure Abdullah's story:

You will cope well with pressure
You will never give up
You will admit your mistakes⁷⁵

This strategy enacts a fluctuation between individuals (addressed within the audience and in the stories) and a sense of collective presence and responsibility around a cataclysmic event. In a key section of the performance, Hurley also writes himself into the narrative: 'And you are a man, sat a desk, telling a story about the end of the world'.⁷⁶ Collapsing the boundaries between the characters, the performer and the audience, Hurley then briefly shifts to the third person as he addresses his performative agency in willing the end of the world.

⁷³ Hurley, *Heads Up*, p. 23, 24.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 25.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 21.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 46.

And he's decided that it has to be because he wants you, Mercy, Abdullah, Léon, Ash, each of you to have to face up to something that right now you all know, you all deeply know, and Mercy you know for sure. What each of you feels but can't speak. The light in the sky, the smell in the air, the hum in the background, unspoken. To be made at this point in the story, unavoidable. As each head in the city lifts up, looks out the window, looks to the sky to see:
The truth you already knew.
That this world cannot continue.
This world will not continue.
This has to stop.
This has to stop.
This has to stop.⁷⁷

At this point, 'a crashing white noise, rising in pitch and intensity' eventually breaks, 'as the high-pitched sound becomes ethereal, choral, music'. This sound, and the repetition of the phrase 'this has to stop' can be read in relation to the recurring scream of *Hitch*, and as we are entreated to understand in *Beats*, 'it doesn't mean nothing'. It is the 'cry of humanity' – an instinctive, passionate cry of anguish and frustration at the world we have created – the world that we are part of. But in that ethereal music, it carries with it the seeds of reconciliation and hope.

For Rancière, by 'twisting, seizing and rending', art intertwines 'contradictory relations' into a common expression, 'weaving' communities together through aesthetic form.⁷⁸ But in this cathartic moment in *Heads Up*, the process of binding of communities – real, imagined and aspirational – is more like a fusion; the three communities (audience, artwork and future) are forged together in the brutality of that moment. And Hurley tells us that there has to be something huge, and that everything has to change. So much – everything – has to come to an end. But there will be something afterwards. So, it is significant that in the final moments of *Heads Up*, we are with each other once again. The fluctuation has stopped and we are no longer disconnected. For now, at least, we are back together:

The people gather. Gathering in crowds. Like the way they gather to watch the scheduled demolition of a tower block. Gathering to see it all come crashing down. The end of things.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 47.

⁷⁸ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 58, 57.

⁷⁹ Hurley, *Heads Up*, p. 61.

Conclusion

Rancière suggests that ‘many contemporary artists no longer set out to create works of art. Instead, they want to get out of the museum and induce alterations in the space of everyday life, generating new forms of relations’.⁸⁰ While Hurley’s studio-based performances take place ‘in the museum’, so to speak, they expand to a wider relational realm in a number of ways: through the ‘everyday’ events that are incorporated into the ‘sensory fabric’ of the works (from Hurley’s journey to L’Aquila to the bitumen pavements of Livingstone); in the here and now of the audience-community addressed during the performance; and, importantly, the possibility of ‘new forms of relations’ is also suggested through the construction of future communities: the *becoming* of ‘the impossible people’ of political protest.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, impossibility is a challenging concept to comprehend and work towards. To the Right and Left of the political spectrum, ‘the accommodation of difference’ no longer seems to be ‘a moral virtue’, let alone ‘a set of everyday practices’.⁸¹ In this climate, the inevitability of disconnection appears as a cause for despair and hopelessness. Hurley’s theatre offers an alternative model. It shows us that we are intricately and unavoidably part of the same world. Recognising this human condition, with all our divergences, conflicts, tensions and disconnections, might allow us to move forward into the future.

At the end of *Rantin*, like all Hurley’s performances, ‘the lights dim. And the people will leave and go out into the world. And the story will continue’.⁸² The theatre has brought an audience-community into a direct relationship with various narrated communities, as well as a range of desperate and distinct individuals existing and interacting at the periphery. In mobilising these aesthetic groupings, Hurley’s theatre reaches beyond itself to address the community that we want to be part of, and the relationships that can make this possible.

⁸⁰ Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, p. 53.

⁸¹ Reid, “Sexy Kilts with Attitude”, p. 205.

⁸² Hurley, ‘Rantin’, p. 354.