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Bad Feelings

Extreme affective dramaturgies in Alistair McDowall's *all of it*

ISABEL STUART

June 2023. Front row at the Royal Court Theatre, London. Kate O'Flynn has just performed Alistair McDowall's *all of it*. A 45-minute experimental monologue that takes us from birth to death: an entire life in one breath. About twenty years of O'Flynn's unnamed character's life is summarized by her repeating 'driving to work, driving to work, driving to work, driving to work' at least 200 times. Her mother dies, she gets married, her brother dies, she gets divorced, her daughter grows up, she re-marries, her husband dies. Then she dies, terrified and in pain, wondering if she had a good life or not. It is beautiful and utterly bleak. When the monologue is over, I can hear the sounds of sniffing and crying from people in the audience. I am crying too. I feel completely devastated. Before I leave the theatre and make the journey home, I have to go into a toilet cubicle and cry it all out.

I begin this article with my own affective response to McDowall's *all of it* (2023) to illustrate the emotional impact the performance had on me as an audience member. Sara Ahmed might describe this emotional impact as leaving an 'impression' (2004: 6). Distinct from the common phraseology of 'it left an impression on me', Ahmed insists that 'we need to remember the "press" in an impression. It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace' (ibid.). The affective residues of this performance have stayed with me far beyond the initial encounter. I experienced 'bad feelings' while watching *all of it*. Perhaps they could be called 'hard feelings' or 'hopeless feelings': feelings that left me heavy and dazed, unable to immediately re-enter the world after this intensely emotional theatrical experience.

all of it consisted of three experimental monologues, or 'three poems' as McDowall calls

them in the play text, all performed by Kate O'Flynn one after the other. The first monologue, *Northleigh, 1940*, begins with O'Flynn reciting cryptic apocalyptic visions, full of dread, horror and intrigue. The piece then shifts abruptly to a wartime scene: a young woman sharing a Morrison shelter with her father. They speak of their ordinary lives amidst the terrors of war, but despite being caged together in the shelter, the distance and strain in their relationship is abundantly clear. In the second monologue, *In Stereo*, O'Flynn embodies a woman obsessed with a spot of damp in her bedroom wall. Eventually, as the spot grows larger and larger, she becomes the wall itself, trapped in it for eternity. Performed in a similar fast-paced repetitive tone as *all of it*, O'Flynn narrates 'like a climate-change Beckett' (Jays 2023) the changing world around her over several millennia: civilization collapsing, humanity ending, extreme weather eroding the landscape so that the wall dissipates, and she becomes the air. The final monologue, *all of it*, tells the story of an 'ordinary' woman's life at extreme pace. O'Flynn sits on a high stool with a microphone upon a bare stage. An entire life is captured in a flash: from inquisitive toddler to insecure teenager to regretful mother over a 45-minute monologue performed at rapid speed.

While ostensibly about one woman's ordinary life, the climate catastrophe lingered in the atmosphere of *all of it* following the threat of existential crises foregrounded in the previous two monologues. The effect of this is that my emotional response to the woman's life could not be separated from the conditions that produced it: the pressures and expectations of heteronormative patriarchal capitalism, and the way these pressures keep people busy, distracting many of us from taking the action needed to address otherwise inevitable social and ecological destruction. The production urges

spectators to confront their own mortality and that of their loved ones, the fragility of life and its potential pointlessness, and how our lack of action will impact future generations and the planet.

On my way home from the performance, I stumbled towards the London Underground and reflected on what my own 'bad feelings' and the 'bad feelings' of others can 'do' politically. I have spent the past several years researching the political potential of emotions in feminist performance, arguing that affective encounters in performance can form solidarities through collectives of feeling, and offer opportunities for audiences to imagine futures that illuminate hope and possibility beyond what is offered within current systems of power. The feelings I had after *all of it* – despair, devastation, profound sadness – are not typically seen as productive emotions to tackle societal and ecological collapse. Crucially, however, I did not come away from *all of it* feeling like the performance was pointlessly depressing. The production's affective dramaturgy, I suggest, promoted an intensity of feeling from audience members. This was not, however, at the expense of leaving audience members with questions. The performance forced me to consider: how do we break out of the banal cycle of life under patriarchal capitalism where waged work and marriage are valued above all else? How do we find ways to face the enormity of ecological collapse when we are so distracted by our own insular lives? There were glimpses of hope and connection in the production, too. How do we hold onto these moments in an increasingly difficult world? Through experiencing these bad feelings, it strengthened my conviction that this cannot be the only way things can be: there must be better, more joyful and equitable ways of being in the world.

This article advocates for the political potential of affective dramaturgies that push audiences to experience 'bad feelings' – such as despair and hopelessness – in the face of dystopic futures. Following feminist scholarship that argues for the political necessity of acknowledging and utilizing negative affects within political discourses, I analyse *all of it* from a feminist, affect-centred lens to argue

that facing hopeless feelings together and acknowledging their presence might open up possibilities for renewed clarity and action orientated towards more equitable conditions for living together in and with the world. Whether explicitly referenced in *In Stereo* and *Northleigh, 1940* or lingering in the background of *all of it*, climate catastrophe and the existential threat of societal collapse deeply impacted my affective response to the performance and the bad feelings that were produced. Drawing on Timothy Morton's theorizing of global warming as a hyperobject – in other words, a phenomenon so vast and emotionally challenging it is impossible to fully comprehend – I argue that bad or hopeless feelings are crucial to how we understand affective cultures that surround the climate emergency and climate denial, contributing to the societal lack of action when it is so desperately needed (Morton 2013). As I explain later in this article, it is precisely because climate change produces such bad feelings that many cannot engage with the enormity of climate crisis and how to curve its progress.

Overall, I argue that *all of it's* affective dramaturgy of extremity, which pushes the limits of language and voice through repetition, blurs temporal distinctions and elicits extreme emotional responses from O'Flynn and the audience, forces spectators to confront difficult realities that might lead to imagining ways to be in the world outside of capitalism and inevitable climate disaster. I argue that facing 'bad feelings' in performance is a productive way to rally against societal structures that seem immovable, as feeling bad together might allow for alternative possibilities to emerge that offer hope.

SITUATING BAD FEELINGS

Before analysing the affective dramaturgy of *all of it*, it is important to situate my engagement with bad feelings in a larger context of affect theory and queer-feminist scholarship that considers how negative affects circulate in society and between bodies. While the prominence of bad feelings in feminist discourse is well documented (see Stephens 2015), what

scholars classify as bad feelings varies both in terms of the affects identified and their political value. In this article, I specifically consider bad feelings like hopelessness and despair in relation to the climate crisis – a context in which these bad feelings would typically be seen as unproductive and lacking in political charge – to argue for their subversive political potential when felt collectively. As I argue in this article, *all of it* can be read as an eco-feminist production, with the bad feelings I felt as a spectator being connected to the character's identity as a woman who is affected by the pressures and disappointments of patriarchal capitalism. Scholars such as Ahmed (2010), Cvetkovich (2003, 2012), Ngai (2005), Berlant (2011) and Yao (2021) have argued for the subversive qualities of alternative emotional states that might otherwise be deemed insignificant or actively harmful, and their specific political power for marginalized subjects.

These critical enquires into negative affective states sit within a larger lineage of affect studies. Affect theorist Patricia Clough argues that affect refers to 'a body's capacity to act, to engage, to connect ... linked to the self-feeling of being alive' (2007: 2). In reminding us of our aliveness at skin-level, affect can connect us to the world and to one another in politically powerful ways. Erin Hurley also signals an embodied dimension to affect when she writes that affect is an 'immediate, uncontrollable, skin-level registration to a change in our environment' (2010: 18). I work with this definition as it holds space for a range of affective responses on a broad scale: from minor environmental changes to experiences that make us grimace, sweat, or cry uncontrollably.

My use of the term 'affect' in this article is to acknowledge the embodied aspect of emotional responses in performance, and to signal the shared and circulatory nature of affective experiences. I find feeling as an overarching term useful for the reason Martin Welton discusses, as 'feeling migrates between emotion and cognition, and is reflective of the extent to which thought, affect, and sensation are bound together' (2011: 5). Ann Cvetkovich also favours feeling in her writing as the term is

'intentionally imprecise, retaining the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences' (2012: 4).

Returning to negativity, as Elizabeth Stephens argues in her article comparing feminist discourses around negative affects, 'at the start of the twenty-first century, bad feelings are everywhere' (2015: 273). Here, Stephens draws attention to the expanding literature on negative affective states in feminist theory. In recent years, cultural theorists such as Yao, Ahmed and Ngai have explored the potential of political resistance in unfeeling, 'other' feelings, and ugly feelings respectively. Although distinctly different in their framing and contextualizing, these scholars argue for the political efficacy of lived affective experiences that disrupt the hierarchy of emotions imposed by Western patriarchal society. Ngai's exploration of *Ugly Feelings* (2005) is particularly relevant to my interest in bad feelings, as Ngai deliberately favours 'amoral and *noncathartic* feelings' rather than bigger passions to open up a 'more fluid reading of all feelings across forms, genres and time periods' (Ngai 2005: 6–7, emphasis in original).

In terms of feminist politics, the political value of paying attention to negative affects is that 'negativity provides a way to critique the compulsory positivity of contemporary Western cultures, and to reconceptualise positive affects not as spontaneous personal feelings but as political conditions' (Stephens 2015: 279). Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) speaks to this culture of positivity, arguing that women 'have a responsibility to be happy for others' and that 'happiness becomes a form of being directed or oriented, of following "the right way"' (2010: 9). As I return to later, the expectation of happiness under patriarchy is directly connected to the disappointment O'Flynn's character feels in the production's final monologue.

My focus on bad feelings draws on scholarship that considers other alternative modes of feeling that might be seen as 'unproductive' politically and leading to inaction. In his exploration of 'sneaky feelings', Asher Warren (2018) notes that sneaky feelings in performance can slip in

unexpectedly when they are not ‘supposed’ to be felt. Feelings like irritation and annoyance can linger in ways that feel unhelpful yet are simultaneously hard to ignore. As Ngai argues, ‘irritation and its close relations – bother, annoyance, vexation, aggravation, pique – might be described as negative affect at its weakest, mildest and most politically effete form’ (2005: 181). Similarly, Warren is interested in the ‘blockages, negations and inactions that become bound up’ with sneaky feelings (2018: 89).

While the bad feelings I discuss in this article are more extreme in their affective force than the ‘low level affects’ (90) Warren and Ngai describe, there are similarities in how they are perceived in relation to their political efficacy. Warren argues that ‘sneaky feelings’ can leave one ‘plagued with indecision’ and ‘overwhelmed with a suite of bad feeling’ while never being strong enough to bring one ‘to any decisive action’ (89). This sense that bad feelings can be so overwhelming that they stunt action is particularly relevant when thinking about how important action is in the context of climate catastrophe.

Timothy Morton frames global warming as a ‘hyperobject’ as it ‘cannot be directly seen, but can be thought of and computed’ (2013: 3). The vastness of hyperobjects make them almost impossible to truly comprehend, and often too daunting to want to look at: ‘like a nightmare that brings news of some real psychic intensity’ (32). Morton describes the distanced relationship between individuals and hyperobjects when he writes ‘not only do I fail to access hyperobjects at a distance, but it also becomes clearer with every passing day that “distance” is only a psychic and ideological construct designed to protect me from the nearness of things’ (3). I argue that one of the political uses of experiencing bad feelings in performance about the climate crisis is that it forces audiences to pay attention to the hyperobject of the climate crisis and their feelings towards it.

In response to these overwhelming feelings about the climate crisis, it is a common experience particularly for those in the West to turn away from facing the problem, becoming indifferent to avoid such bad feelings. As Maria Hynes argues, there is anxiety around

embracing indifference as a productive affect. She writes that ‘in the face of this perceived heightening of our responsibility for political, ecological and cultural systems, the spectre of indifference confronts us as an abhorrent failure to meet the demands of the day’ (Hynes 2016: 25). In other words, the anxiety comes from a sense that indifference is inherently an unproductive emotion that enables those feeling it to ignore pressing issues. In her discussion of performances that are overwhelming and extremely intense, Helena Grehan (2010) also notes the audience anxiety that comes with feeling ambivalent in response to horrifying subject matter, and how sitting with ambivalence might lead to a deeper consideration of both response and responsibility.

I have written elsewhere about the subversive political potential of some forms of indifference from marginalized subjects towards oppressive systems of power (Stuart 2023), and in their framing of unfeeling, Yao has argued that we must rethink unfeeling ‘not as oppression from above but a tactic from below’ (2021: 3). However, in the case of ecological disaster, when inaction and indifference from Western subjects is causing material harm and destruction in the Global South and for all younger and future generations, I argue that productions like *all of it*, which urges spectators to feel bad, frightening, depressing feelings in community with others, is a necessary step towards facing the ‘demands of the day’ and inciting political engagement (Hynes 2018: 25).

In this sense, my conceptualization of bad feelings in relation to *all of it* is most closely related to Berlant’s (2004) and Cvetkovich’s (2003, 2012) work on ‘public feelings’, which pays attention to the ‘larger shared economy’ (Warren 2018: 89) of affective cultures, and the political importance of acknowledging that circulatory nature of emotions as something that exists ‘both in us and in the world at the same time’ (Welton 2011: 9). Cvetkovich explains how the goal of her Public Feelings forum is ‘to depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as possible resources for political action rather than its antithesis’ (2012: 2). As she argues, thinking about bad feelings collectively, ‘including negative feelings that

can seem so debilitating' can 'generate the affective foundation of hope that is necessary for political action' (ibid.). In this article, I continue Cvetkovich's line of questioning when she asks, how do we 'acknowledge our own political disappointment and failures in a way that can be enabling? Where might hope be possible' when it comes to repositioning our depressing feelings as politically productive? Overall, I argue for the subversive political power of feeling bad feelings together. By assembling feminist and queer scholars who argue for the value of negative affects alongside social science perspectives on climate crisis, my engagement with bad feelings comes with a caveat: bad feelings cannot become an excuse for complacency or be romanticized as or instead of action on their own terms. Instead, they can be felt collectively in order to be stuck with – and eventually, moved through – towards political action to fight ecological and societal collapse.

In the next section I will interrogate the extreme affective dramaturgy in *all of it*, compelling spectators to confront bad feelings about life under capitalism and the climate crisis. In using the term 'affective dramaturgies', I am signalling performative strategies deployed by theatre makers that heighten affective connection and emotional response in a way that pushes for feeling. I am referring to dramaturgies that are committed to producing audience feeling through onstage techniques as well as being about emotionally intense subject matters. The following analysis focuses mainly on *In Stereo* and *all of it*, and how these monologues work together to create an affective atmosphere of extremity that allows audiences the chance to face bad feelings in a shared space with others.

EXTREME TEMPORALITIES

At the start of *Northleigh*, 1940, O'Flynn's relentless narration of a post-apocalyptic world is immediately contrasted with the banal everyday:

as through this endless deluge it became a coursing waterfall which charged to cause my tumbling back below. And as I held I felt each socket fill with tumorous growth, as bulbous eyes that swelled within each hole. Did leer at me as though perhaps had enough to buy her own gramophone so she wouldn't

have to use the one downstairs. (McDowall 2023: 4)

There is no pause in O'Flynn's delivery between 'each hole' and 'did leer' despite the sharp shift in temporal and spatial framing from dystopian wasteland to wartime living room. Instead, O'Flynn's tone and pitch changes in an instant, from banal, repetitive and unhuman rapid speech to decidedly casual and light in tone. This sharp switch from hellish to ordinary prompted some audience members to laugh at the absurdity and surprise of the shift, allowing audiences a brief respite from O'Flynn's onslaught of fearful descriptions. Across the trilogy of monologues, McDowall's writing textually and viscerally connects the everyday, ordinary life of a singular woman, to the lifespan of civilization and Earth itself, and this above example sets the tone for all three pieces. While only one actor appears on stage for the entire performance, the temporal and spatial frame of the piece is large and sprawling, from 1940s wartime in *Northleigh*, across several millennia in *In Stereo*, and across an entire lifetime in *all of it*.

Unlike *all of it*, which has minimal set, sound and lighting design, in *In Stereo*, Melanie Wilson creates a disorientating and intense sound design made up of competing dialogue and static noises from an old-fashioned television set. O'Flynn does not speak at all for most of the piece; instead, her inner thoughts are heard through overlapping voiceovers as she slowly moves around the space inspecting the walls. Elliot Grigg's lighting design creates the illusion that the walls surrounding the stage are covered in mould, with O'Flynn's narrator obsessing over removing the growing stains. As her obsession grows, she starts seeing double and her face appears in the television screen as a pre-recorded video, their voices competing like intrusive thoughts that can't be ignored.

As the voices get louder and more overpowering, the spot in the wall becomes a hole that pulls the woman inside it: 'quiet can't hear anyone in the house looking out into the bedroom at the bed I am the wall I am the wall now I think' (McDowall 2023: 32). The woman transforms into a trapped observer of passing time. At first, she narrates domestic changes: her house being cleared out, new owners moving in,

changing the furniture, moving out again. Then, the demolition of the house and the destruction of the wall due to the changing environment: 'the heat and the heat and the rain it rains burn down wash away curl up, up into the air' (33). War and poverty come to her door, too:

I'm out still standing amongst the rubble sun
beating breaking breaking me up see the people
picking through claim shelter ... O there I go
in pieces again how funny broken breaking up
someone grabbing pieces of me to beat someone
into the ground blood mingled. (McDowall 2023: 33)

This relentless dystopian dialogue draws parallels to Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) also staged at the Royal Court, in which four older women are gathered in a cosy back garden socializing over tea and cake. At intervals throughout the play, one of the women – Mrs Jarrett – breaks out of this domestic and easy setting to narrate to the audience the post-apocalyptic futures we are heading towards in extreme detail.

As O'Flynn recalls the horrors of these successive generations, she stands centre stage with her arms outstretched like the wall itself, as if about to be torn apart. As an audience member, it is hard to watch. The overwhelming force of the dialogue, the increasing volume of the speech and the extreme pace at which it is delivered relentlessly pushed me towards feelings of hopelessness and despair. The picture McDowall paints of the future in *In Stereo* is bleak and seemingly inevitable, and it produces bad feeling in part because there is no alternative presented. Just as the woman is trapped passively in the wall for eternity unable to stop anything around her from happening, the audience are also trapped in our seats unable to change the course of the future being told to us.

Through this expansive temporal scope, which is emphasized through vocal affective devices such as changes in pitch and increases in noise and volume, the monologue draws connections between the ordinariness of our daily lives and the impending collapse of society if we fail to reverse the effects of climate change. Morton explains how the scale of hyperobjects like climate change are almost impossible to truly comprehend because 'they involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale

ones we are used to' (2013: 1). This extremely fast-paced narration, which blurs distinctions between the past, present and future, compels spectators to consider our connectedness and responsibility towards past and future generations, and to the planet that is currently facing irreparable destruction. It pushes the audience to think about the future beyond our own lifetimes.

Instead of making an argument that bad feelings produced in *In Stereo* can somehow be co-opted or transformed into positive affects, I argue for the political potential of sitting with the reality of these bad feelings and seeing what possibilities or alternative ways of thinking emerge from staying in the state of shared negativity. As Cvetkovich writes, discussing political depression in the presence of others is about 'finding ways to survive disappointment and to remind ourselves of the persistence of radical visions and ways of living' (2012: 6). While Jill Dolan (2005: 5) has argued for the political potential of 'utopian performatives' in performance, moments that 'lift everyone slightly above the present, in a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like', I argue that solidarity can also be created by paying attention to the hopelessness of the current world. Experiencing bad feelings in the collective space of the theatre might counteract the isolation and overwhelming sense of despair about issues like the climate crisis, and offer ways to move through them together.

AFFECTIVE REPETITION

The feelings of existential dread brought up by *In Stereo* lingered into my experience of *all of it*. Dramaturgically, the choice to perform the monologues in this order highlights the extreme difference in temporalities from the existential threat of climate change to the inevitability of our own mortality. Morton argues that 'the vastness of the hyperobject's scale makes smaller beings – people, countries, even continents – seem like an illusion' (2013: 32). McDowall's decision to shift between these temporal states draws attention both to the insignificance of one person's lifetime compared to much larger hyperobjects, and the

importance, beauty and meaning we try to place on our own comparatively small lives.

During *all of it*, O'Flynn sat under a spotlight on an otherwise black stage on a high stool with a microphone attached to wire, reminiscent of a comedian at a stand-up comedy gig. The effect of this is an intense focus on the language and O'Flynn's facial expressions, and O'Flynn's arguably virtuosic performance pushes the limits of tone, pitch and vocal ability by performing the monologue at extreme speed. Early in the monologue, we witness O'Flynn embody the voice and mannerisms of a baby figuring out her way in the world: 'MUM. RED. DOG. DA. DAG. DOD. MURRMURRMURRMURRMURRMURRMURR. In. In. food. FOO. FOOFOOFOO. In. Shhh' (McDowall 2023: 41). She transitions to a young girl realizing that everyone dies: 'I have two grandads and one grandma. I have everyone. Everyone dies. Everyone dies. Everyone dies. One day' (48). These moments of childhood realization about mortality are highlighted through repetition and embodied through textual and vocal extremity. These affective strategies push language in both joyous and heart-breaking ways, as the narrator's eventual disappointment with certain aspects of her life are made more painful in contrast to the joyful innocence of her childhood.

Repetition reappears constantly in *all of it* as a performative device to highlight the banality of life under patriarchal capitalism. O'Flynn's repetition of 'driving to work' to cover at least twenty years of her life is an affectively compelling example of this. The repetition is only interrupted with lines that show the passing of time, the struggles of motherhood or the deterioration of relationships. For example, 'the cost of childcare is obscene actually obscene' or 'nothing's happened I just don't particularly want to be married anymore' or 'my brother has died' (McDowall 2023: 66–8). This speaks directly to Ahmed's fantasy figure of the 'happy housewife', where one is 'living a life that is meant to be happy but just isn't, which is meant to be full but feels empty' (2010: 75). In this repetition I am again reminded of Churchill's *Escaped Alone*, in which Mrs Jarrett shouts 'terrible rage' repeatedly, forcing the audience to

consider the plethora of horrors to rage against, her intensity growing with each repetition.

The journey from inquisitive toddler to a life completely consumed by work and the expectations and disappointments of heteronormative capitalism speaks directly to Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, in which Berlant argues that the promise of a 'good life' under capitalism can be actively harmful, as it keeps subjects chasing for a life that is a fantasy, one that does not and cannot exist: 'the "good life" is ... a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it' (2011: 27). One of the woman's last thoughts as she is about to die is 'think I had a good life but it's hard to tell really I don't have anything to compare' (McDowall 2023: 77). The ongoing temporality of cruel optimism connects to Jack Halberstam's theorization of 'queer time' and 'straight time', in which he argues that 'queer uses of time and space develop ... in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction' (2003: 314). In *all of it*, the woman is not only failed by capitalism, but the expectations of heteronormativity or 'straight time', and its limitations.

As Eirini Kartsaki argues about the power of repetition in performance, 'repetition has the capacity to create an archive, as its affective memory demands a re-visiting and re-exploring' (2016: 7). O'Flynn's relentless repetitive delivery in which she barely pauses for breath acts as a generator for affect as it demands we stay with the bad feelings: to re-explore our own affective connections to the structure of our lives, to consider how society values work above all else, to notice the mechanisms of capitalism that keep us busy and distracted. As Stephens articulates about the importance of feeling negative affects in community, 'when joy and positivity are privileged as ethical states, despondency and negativity might be construed as personal ethical failings in a way that overlooks how mediated these affects are by wider cultural and subjective forces' (2015: 276). Acknowledging wider cultures of negative affects and having the space to feel bad feelings without shame, to acknowledge the lie of the 'good life' (Berlant 2011: 1), might move audiences towards one

another and allow space to imagine alternative possibilities that interrupt the banal repetitive cycle of ‘driving to work’ and all that line encompasses.

CONCLUSION: KEEP ON FEELING

This article has argued for the political potential of affective dramaturgies that allow space for audiences to collectively feel ‘bad feelings’ – states of feelings that are often seen as unproductive for invigorating political action – in the face of social, political and ecological collapse. I have argued that *all of it* deploys an affective dramaturgy of extremity in multiple ways. First, by forcing audiences to face the threat of dystopic futures, laying bare the banality and everyday brutality of patriarchal capitalism that distracts us from paying attention to severe crises. Second, by expanding and blurring temporal distinctions, playing with time as a dramaturgical device to compel individual subjects to feel responsibility and connection to future generations. Third, by pushing voice and language to its extreme through performative strategies like repetition to draw attention to the gendered expectations of capitalism. While the initial visceral impact of the affective encounter has subsided, my own bad feelings in relation to *all of it* have endured and stuck with me in ways that are politically valuable: they have kept me affectively engaged and tuned into the conditions that capitalist structures want us to be remain distracted from and desensitized to.

In March 2024, I watched *Big Finish* by feminist performance art collective Figs in Wigs at the Battersea Arts Centre in London. The production is about endings: it is a direct response to the theatre industry being on the brink of collapse in the UK on one level, and about the end of the world on another. Like all their work, the production is absurd, surreal and often funny. In one scene, foam falls slowly from a pipe at the back of the stage to symbolize an iceberg while all five members of Figs in Wigs form an orchestra and badly perform Celine Dion’s *My Heart Will Go On* until the sinking ship they are on falls into the sea. The implications of this for the British theatre landscape and for the

future of the planet are bleak and depressing, but while I felt a sadness watching them refuse to leave the sinking ship, I also felt hopeful to be acknowledging the reality of the circumstances with others. As Stephens argues, ‘positivity and negativity, happiness and sadness, cruelty and optimism ... are not sets of opposing terms but orientation points in a larger field of possibilities’ and what *all of it* and *Big Finish* demonstrated to me through radically different affective dramaturgies that engaged with bad feelings is that there is a hopeful solidarity in facing hard feelings together (2015: 281). More than that, I argue we have a collective responsibility to not leave the ship: to stay and fight for better, socially and ecologically transformed futures, and part of that means acknowledging the presence of bad feelings and figuring out what to do with them together.

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LIVE PERFORMANCES

all of it, written by Alistair McDowall, dir. by Vicky Featherstone and Sam Pritchard, Royal Court Theatre, London, 6–17 June 2023.

Big Finish, written and dir. by Figs in Wigs, Battersea Arts Centre, London, 14–27 March 2024.

Escaped Alone, written by Caryl Churchill, dir. by, James Macdonald, Royal Court Theatre, London 21 January–12 March 2016.