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Seeing double: alcohol, gender, and English Nationalism in *Sh!t Theatre Drink Rum with Expats*

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces ‘seeing double’ as a strategy for analysing performances which are politically challenging or stage juxtapositions. In *Sh!t Theatre Drink Rum with Expats* (2019–2021), performance art duo Sh!t Theatre uncover the scale of corruption in Malta, all while getting drunk at an English expat pub. By drawing attention to the relationality between drinking with expats and migrant death, I argue *Expats* urges audiences to consider their own complicity in systemic border violence. First, through examining the expat pub, I argue that *Expats* exposes pubs, drinking, and drunkenness as signifiers of English patriarchal nationalism abroad. Second, I analyse Sh!t Theatre’s contrasting dramaturgy which stages juxtaposed realities of fun and horror simultaneously. Ultimately, I argue that investigating alcohol in performance illuminates how our social activities are entangled within systems of power, and propose seeing double as a methodology in which performances that dramaturgically engage with juxtapositions can be interrogated.

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Introduction

In 2024, at Glastonbury festival in Somerset, England, anonymous artist Banksy launched an inflatable migrant boat into the crowd during the rock band IDLES set. The raft, a rubber dinghy carrying inflatable figures of migrants wearing hoodies and lifejackets, was crowd surfed on the hands of thousands of spectators at the festival.¹ Interpreted as a response to then-Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s immigration policy, which pledged to ‘stop the boats’ of migrants trying to reach Britain, Banksy’s stunt was praised by liberal media outlets as a rousing protest against anti-immigrant policies and an act of solidarity from Glastonbury attendees. However, upon viewing footage of the intervention, I found both the aesthetics and politics of this action uncomfortable. Watching the crowd at Glastonbury – an overwhelmingly white and middle-class festival – aimlessly tossing the raft which represented real migrant bodies into the air as they would any other inflatable, while cheering, dancing, and no doubt drinking, felt to me like a careless response to the realities of migrant death.

The juxtaposed image of the migrant boat permeating the space of the festival crowd evoked Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of an ‘epoch of simultaneity’, where for a moment, the fun leisure time of the festival-goers was ‘side-by-side’ with migrant death.² Foucault describes these temporal and spatial configurations as crisis heterotopias: ‘an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another, implicated by each other – that makes them appear, in short, as a sort of configuration’.³ This opening example signifies the kinds of relations and encounters this article seeks to interrogate: spaces of juxtaposition where privileged subjects’ leisure time and fun are situated ‘side by side’ with systemic border violence and migrant death. In Sh!t Theatre’s *Sh!t Theatre Drink Rum with Expats*, an expat pub in Malta is the site of these juxtapositions. In a process I term ‘seeing double’, I argue that Sh!t Theatre’s critical engagement with alcohol on stage compels audiences to witness the fun and the horrifying in the same time and space, thus drawing attention to the relationality of these juxtaposed yet interdependent realities.

Sh!t Theatre are UK-based performance art duo Louise Mothersole and Rebecca Biscuit. Their work is political and personal, combining live documentary theatre with comedy, mixed-media and music to produce performances which tackle pressing political and social issues, such as the UK housing crisis (*Letters to Windsor House*, 2017), the politics of celebrity (*DollyWould*, 2018, *Evita Too*, 2022–), everyday sexism (*Women's Hour*, 2014), and grief (*Or What's Left of Us*, 2024).⁴ They have been co-creating, writing, and performing together since 2010. In *Evita Too*, the Sh!ts jokingly refer to their formulaic performance-making process, which includes going on holiday, drinking a lot, documenting the trip, and then telling the audience about it. This self-aware and self-deprecating critique encapsulates the politics of their work where they draw the audience in with humour and silliness and then disarm them with challenging material.

In *Expats*, Becca and Louise recount the story of being invited by their friend Charlie to create a one-off performance in a pub in Malta as part of Valetta, European Capital of Culture 2018. Of course, they agreed, thinking it would be a fun, free holiday: 'do the show, take the money, and run!'⁵ What they (claim they) did not realize was that during their boozed-filled trip, they would discover something much darker lurking under the surface of the seemingly calm Mediterranean. Over the course of the show, the audience realize the horrifying political situation in Malta just like Sh!t Theatre did when they were there: Becca and Louise give us hints of systemic political corruption from the start of the show, which heightens and reveals itself as it goes on. We learn that Malta, being in the middle of the Mediterranean, is a country that many migrants try to reach, often fleeing war from places such as Libya. Sh!t Theatre read reports of migrants attempting to reach Malta's shores over pints of beer in *The Pub*, they make friends with migrants who have made it to Malta and listen to their stories, and they join marches against political corruption. The atmosphere of political unrest in Malta at the time of their visit is extremely high. The Sh!ts tell us about the murder of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was killed in a car bomb for challenging political corruption in Malta and exposing the sale of 'golden passports' which enable the super-rich to purchase European citizenship.

Despite these bleak and unjust circumstances, 'Sh!t theatre are having the time of their fucking lives', as theatre reviewer Ava Wong Davies writes: 'and we're all invited'.⁶ 'The Pub' that Becca and Louise invite the audience to, stands in for the real-life pub they spent most of their time in when they were in Malta, which is frequented mainly by white expats. Throughout the production, *The Pub* is where the audience are always brought back to. Images of *The Pub* are projected onto the back wall along with illustrations of the expats that the Sh!ts chat to. *The Pub* is covered in St. George's flags to signify its position as a 'home away from home' for the expats. Analysing the politicized site of the pub as a microcosm of England abroad, I centre my analysis on Sh!t Theatres' engagement with alcohol on stage. By drawing attention to the connection between the drinking of the expats in *The Pub* on one hand, and migrant death on the other, I argue Sh!t Theatre's contrasting dramaturgy has the potential to compel audiences to consider their own complicity, privilege, and relationality to violent systems of migration.

As Chloe Rae Edmonson argues, alcohol is never 'ideologically neutral' and rather plays a 'significant role in reinscribing certain racial, spatial, gendered, and economic inequalities'.⁷ By deploying alcohol in *Expats*, Sh!t Theatre bring the audience into this realm of intoxication and critical reflection, exposing pubs, drinking, and drunkenness as signifiers of gendered English national identity, which help produce English patriarchal nationalism abroad. Through this case study, I propose seeing double as a methodology for engaging with performances which are ethically messy, politically challenging, and which implicate the audience through embodied practices such as drinking.

Alcohol in *Expats*

Alcohol is a calling card in Sh!t Theatre's work. In almost every Sh!t show, Becca and Louise have incorporated drinking on stage into their dramaturgy, and often invite the audience to have a drink with them. Drinking alcohol is a key aspect of their theatrical practice and intentionally 'sh!t' D.I.Y aesthetic. Jim Drobnick articulates alcohol 'as a relational performance medium', which plays a role in 'lubricating sociality', capable of 'creating feelings of cordiality as well releasing chaotic energies'.⁸ This speaks to Sh!t Theatre's complex deployment of alcohol in their shows, where offering audiences a drink and recounting drunken anecdotes is part of their political strategy to find common ground with their audiences before pulling away this safety later in the show.

It is in *Expats*, I propose, that the inclusion of alcohol plays the sharpest and most central role to the social and political issues of the production. Alcohol as a substance carries an abundance of signification, both personal and political. As Mark Jayne, Gill Valentine, and Sarah Holloway argue in their exploration of the social geographies of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness, 'alcohol is at once a social problem, a leisure activity, a pleasure, an accelerator of violence, [and] central to identity formation'.⁹ As Sarah Gorman argues, alcohol on stage is 'disobedient and subversive', and Sh!t Theatre exploit this substance to their political advantage – but their strategies are not without risk.¹⁰

Sh!t Theatre's engagement with alcohol and drinking cultures has the potential to produce a politically useful form of criticality for *some* audiences, specifically those who Ella Parry-Davis might call 'citizen-spectators': spectators 'who identify (to a greater or less extent) with the category of 'citizen'.¹¹ At the greater extent of this spectrum are those who share some of the same privileges as Becca and Louise: being white, English-speaking, and British passport holders.¹² Compelling these audience members to critically reflect on the relationship between drinking cultures and migration can have the effect of leaving spectators 'with the responsibility of their own participation in a violently bordered state'.¹³ Specifically, alcohol could operate as an embodied and social device which can compel some audiences to consider themselves 'as an agent in a social world' with responsibility to other marginalized communities.¹⁴ However, this can also problematically leave audiences who have a lived experience of migration, or do not share the performers' privileges, feeling uncomfortable in ways that are less politically useful, and instead are alienating or isolating.¹⁵ I argue that Sh!t Theatre are intentionally focused on calling out a particular audience in order to prompt political consideration from the most privileged group, but the unease of this dynamic reveals the challenges at the heart of *Expats*.¹⁶

I therefore find messiness a useful frame in which to construct my analysis of *Expats*. As Harriet Curtis argues, mess 'has proved useful in describing not only performance but a range of affective, aesthetic, and political experiences and states of being' and 'as a practice of attunement to the difficulties and possibilities of messy subjects, contexts, and practices'.¹⁷ Alcohol can be a messy substance: it hinders inhibitions, it can make people lose control of their bodies. People's relationship to drinking is deeply personal, culturally specific, and shaped by identity. Using alcohol in performance then, comes with a litany of ethical and political questions, which Sh!t theatre push the boundaries of in *Expats*.¹⁸ Alcohol in *Expats* makes Becca and Louise act in messy ways: they get black-out drunk, they fall out with the friend who invited them to Malta, they drink beer to 'drown their sorrows' as they listen to reports of capsized migrant boats on a Maltese radio channel. The ways in which they represent alcohol in *Expats* could be read as reckless and careless in the context of migrancy, but I argue this ethical messiness compels some audiences (specifically those who are 'citizen-spectators') to confront their own relationship to harmful drinking cultures at the same time as they consider their complicity in wider systems of border violence.

Rather than trying to untangle the messiness, I follow Curtis who proposes 'a practice of lingering on and sitting with mess in all its complexity' in order to argue for the political potential of Sh!t Theatre's engagement with alcohol which draws attention to the ways that the harm happening *over there* – for example, on the shores of Malta – is connected to the 'fun' or comfort that is happening *here* (in The Pub, in the theatre the audience are in, in London where the performance takes place).¹⁹ To return to Foucault, in this 'epoch of juxtaposition', spaces like The Pub do not simply exist alongside sites of migrant death and displacement, but they are *implicated* within the same complex configuration – in this case, the biopolitics of global border systems.²⁰

I draw on Pugliese's work on crisis heterotopias and border zones of the migrant dead where he considers the space of the beach in two nation-states – Lampedusa in Italy and Christmas Island in Australia – as 'violently disjunctive accounts and experiences of (the same) space'.²¹ Through this analysis, he articulates 'the possibility of temporally juxtaposing two absolutely dichotomous figures – the wealthy tourist from the Global North and the utterly disenfranchised refugee from the Global South – within the same geographical space'.²² Pugliese takes the beach as his object of study, describing the utter 'incompatibility' and inconceivable experience of Western tourists sunbathing mere metres from body bags carrying dead migrants who have drowned at the same beach.²³ In the next section, I extend this analysis to the pub in *Expats*.

'You've arrived! Welcome home! Welcome to "The Pub!"'²⁴: Englishness and belonging

'And I love the thought of coming home to you, even if I know we can't make it'. These words, when considered in the context of migrants forced into systems of border violence and separation, are poignant. But when we hear the Sh!t theatre duo singing these lyrics to the audience in *Expats*, it is bombastic, silly, fun, and a classic impression of Brits-abroad-doing-karaoke, enhanced by the St George cross painted on their faces. These words are lyrics from the song 'Fairground' released in 1995 by the British band Simply Red, which plays on repeat as the audience enter the theatre. When the chorus hits, and we hear this lyric, a karaoke version of the song with the lyrics on screen is projected onto the back wall and in the verses of the song, the screen plays slow-motion footage of the 1973 football match between England and Poland.²⁵ Every so often, the screen changes to a present-day news broadcast about migrants drowning or being rescued in the Mediterranean. Becca and Louise are having fun – 'possibly too much fun', as they say in the stage directions – and invite us to do the same: encouraging the audience to come up to 'The Pub' they have created on stage and have a beer with them.²⁶

To create a sense of belonging for the expats, the pub is positioned as a symbol of England exported to Malta. A microcosm of England abroad, The Pub is used as a tool for obscuring and invisibilizing the reality of migrant death and suffering in Malta with cultures of 'fun' and intoxication. Beyond being accepted as tourists in Malta, the starkly juxtaposed positions between the migrants and the expats are further exemplified by the expats' being actively welcomed by Malta's immigration system due to their whiteness and British passports. It is significant that this pub considers itself the one and only – 'The Pub': it has a kind of imperial exceptionalism that reflects the same attitude of the stereotypical expats who frequent it. The colonial politics of the expat pub are enhanced by the St George's flag and Maltese national flag which hang on either side of the stage and look strikingly similar: both white and red. Malta was a British colony from 1800 to 1964, before which it was colonized by France (1798–1800) and controlled by the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, later known as the Knights of Malta from 1530 to 1798.²⁷ In 1943, Malta was awarded the George cross to add to their flag to signify the general population's apparent heroic bravery in World War Two, in which Malta was repeatedly bombed. It was not until 1974 that Queen Elizabeth II was no longer recognized as the Queen of Malta. This colonial history between the UK and Malta is crucial to understanding the positionality of the expats and why they are accepted and feel comfortable on the island compared to migrants from non-EU countries.

The colonial logic of the term 'expat' itself reinforces these exclusionary politics. There is an inherent irony in how the expats view themselves as separate from both the migrants they envision coming to Britain's borders, and the disenfranchised non-white, non-Western migrants of Malta. As Leah Cowan argues, 'due to the inherent inequality borders represent, in the twenty-first century wealthy white people who move countries and cross borders call themselves "expats", while working-class people including people of colour in particular who make the same journey are framed as "immigrants"'.²⁸ The distinction between 'immigrant' or 'migrant' and 'expat' clearly translates to a hierarchy of privilege.

Borders operate specifically to allow and regulate the flow of certain migrants who are seen as economically and socially desirable, and subsequently shut out those who do not fall into this category. British expats in Malta make full use of their British passports to build lives in a different country from the one they were born in. In stark contrast to migrants who are so often turned back once they reach Maltese waters, the expats are explicitly welcomed in and partake in a microcosm of English culture abroad that has been purposely created by the Maltese government and the hospitality industry to encourage tourism and oversea residents of the 'right' kind (namely European, typically white, able to contribute to the economy of Malta, and not in need of state assistance).²⁹ As Pugliese argues in relation to Australia, racialized immigration policy is built on 'excluding non-white bodies from the corpus of the nation whilst also identifying prospective immigrants who were at least proximally white and thus amenable to being assimilated into the white corpus of the nation'.³⁰ It is therefore essential to think about these groups as relational to one another: the kind of imperial leisured existence that is offered to expats is not possible without the rejection of other kinds of migrants that cannot fulfil this image.

When the Sh!ts visited Malta in the aftermath of Brexit, the connection between drinking alcohol, pubs, and Englishness was explicitly utilized by right-wing politicians and architects of the Brexit campaign to push anti-migrant sentiments. At the time of the EU Referendum in 2016, then-UKIP

leader (now Reform party leader) Nigel Farage was routinely photographed drinking pints in pubs, often with English flags behind him. Having successfully positioned himself as a 'man of the people' pint-drinker rather than millionaire stockbroker, Farage emboldened the connection between Englishness and pub-going, and furthermore, positioned this cultural activity as under threat by immigrant communities. Similarly, Tim Martin, founder of Wetherspoons, a widespread UK pub chain, played a key role in the communication of the Leave campaign – with 'Vote Leave – take back control' slogans printed on beer mats across the country.

As Michael Dietler argues, drinking 'has implications throughout society, in the legal, economic, religious, aesthetics and political spheres', and this is particularly true in England, where drinking is frequent, common, and normalized.³¹ I refer predominately to English drinking cultures, English nationalism, and 'Englishness' rather than Britishness in this article for several reasons. First, it reflects the post-Brexit contexts the Sh!ts visited Malta in. As Gemma Edwards explains in relation to how the different nations of the UK voted in the 2016 EU referendum:

While the difference in voting patterns between England and Wales in particular might seem marginal – England had the highest Leave vote at 53.4 per cent compared to 52.5 per cent in Wales, 44.2 per cent in Northern Ireland, and 38 per cent in Scotland – Britain's vote to leave the EU has largely been represented as an English 'problem' in media discourse.³²

Second, in *Expats*, it is the St Georges' flag painted on Becca and Louise's faces and hung up on the stage and in The Pub, not the Union Jack. I follow Michael Kenny, who argues that examining Englishness remains of value 'as a term referencing a field of contention and debate, rather than a set of fixed qualities and character traits', and I discuss Englishness as an imagined set of national characteristics which work to construct a sense of the English nation, and exclude those who do not fit within it.³³ By focussing on England and Englishness, I take up Edwards' call that despite the ways England has been neutralized within discourses of Britain and the UK, 'we need to continue talking about England, not only to acknowledge and critique its imperial past, but also to identify and challenge the ways in which English national imaginaries are deployed in the present'.³⁴

While 2016 saw a revival of the centrality of pubs and drinking to English identity, there is a long-standing association between pub-going and Englishness. In her sociological investigation into English identity, Kate Fox argued that 'the importance of the pub in English culture cannot be over-emphasized' and that 'it would be impossible even to *attempt* to understand Englishness without spending a lot of time in pubs, and it would almost be possible to achieve a good understanding of Englishness without ever leaving the pub'.³⁵ In this strong assertion, the pub becomes synonymous with Englishness. But despite Fox's study and others arguing for the pub as a site of community and belonging, race, and exclusion is rarely mentioned.³⁶ As Singh *et al.* argue in their analysis of race and class in relation to English pubs:

That the pub might be invoked as uniquely indicative of authentic Englishness is scarcely surprising. The pub invokes much that remains hallowed about England's narration of self and its attendant cultural iconography: hearty, earthy and modest.³⁷

Who can conform to 'authentic' English identity is clearly defined by proximity to whiteness, hence figures like Farage and Martin were able to utilize the pub to convey their anti-migrant sentiments in 2016. As Singh *et al.* argue, 'the pub is not only English but is presented as an Englishness that is under siege' by immigrants and others who fall outside of this narrow view of Englishness who are framed as 'taking over' and disrupting 'traditional' national values.³⁸ They go further than this to argue that the pub stages 'the sociabilities [of] the nation, as nationalist commonsense'.³⁹ To support this, in *Expats* the audience hears audio recording of expats discussing Brexit and immigration: 'the sooner we get out the better/what the UK needs and always has had is control of its borders/I'm gonna get a load of shit for this because I voted Leave/I voted for Brexit'.⁴⁰ The show thus argues that the space of the pub can push nationalist agendas in England, and that The Pub in Malta can construct these sentiments beyond the English border. Some of the expats the Sh!ts chat to confirm The Pub as a haven for their 'Englishness'. One says: 'this is the first place I haven't been spat at or had something thrown at me

for being English', while another states: 'as an Englishman, this is a place I relate to more than other bars'.⁴¹

Critiquing gendered nationalism

The term 'Englishman' is how many of the expats in *The Pub* define themselves. The pub in the English cultural imagination is not only connected to whiteness, but to masculinity, as evidenced by figures like Farage, Martin, and Boris Johnson becoming the face of the Brexit campaign. Scholars have noted the masculinities which underpinned Brexit discourses, positioning Britain as the 'strong' independent nation opposed to the 'weak' and feminized rest of Europe.⁴² But as Charlotte Galpin notes, 'gender as a concept' has always been 'essential for understanding British/English national identity'.⁴³ As Galpin citing Graham Dawson explains, 'the idea of heroic, military masculinity has long been connected to 'representations of British imperial identity' in which a 'real man' was one 'prepared to fight ... for Queen, Country and Empire'.⁴⁴ These patriarchal hierarchies and 'glorified traditionally masculine traits of power and heteronormativity' are embedded in the term 'expat', as expatriate comes from the Latin terms *ex* 'out of' and *patria* 'fatherland'.⁴⁵ The idea of expats leaving the powerful male 'fatherland' to move to feminized, 'weaker' European continues this imperial legacy, and emboldens the expats' rarefied position as superior to migrants who are othered through race and gender.

The image of Becca and Louise with the St George's flag painted on their faces, as well as the football match that plays in the background as the audience enter the typically male-dominated space of the pub further exposes the exclusionary politics of gendered nationalism. Specifically, it critiques a certain kind of representation of masculinity – the English football fan or hooligan. Since the 1970s, the St George's flag has been closely associated with far-right politics, and generally only makes a public appearance en masse at far-right demonstrations (for example, at the far-right 'Unite the Kingdom' rally in London in 2025) or football matches. English football fans have a history of visiting foreign countries, partaking in excessive drinking and hugely disruptive behaviour that often leads to violence and criminal damage, then returning home and letting someone else clear up the mess. This is behaviour that migrants cannot get away with.⁴⁶ This sense of entitlement is deeply linked to the historic colonial power and dominance of Britain, and to hyper-masculine, often violent nationalism.

Often categorized as an 'English disease', hooliganism is said to have emerged as a specifically working-class male subculture in England in the 1960s.⁴⁷ Ramón Spaaij lays out the sociological and psychological connections between feelings of fear and the 'buzz' of adrenaline that participants try to obtain through violence, and how this links to power and aggressive hyper-heterosexist masculinity. He writes that 'hooligan formations celebrate a hard masculine identity based on physical prowess' and that 'aggression becomes central to the boy's notion of manhood'.⁴⁸ In the decades following decolonization, while football was deployed as a strategy for England to push post-colonial 'soft power' through cultural diplomacy, hooliganism reinforced English colonial exceptionalism based on domination and violence. By embodying certain aspects of those hyper-masculine cultures in *Expats*, Sh!t Theatre actively engage with the discomfort that comes with celebrating and normalizing the behaviour of the expats that feeds into a wider political climate of heteropatriarchal nationalism.

The relationship between masculinity and nationalism in *Expats* is solidified through the Sh!ts' embodiment of English actor Oliver Reed, who died in *The Pub* in 1999 while drinking with some visiting sailors during the filming of *Gladiator* (2000), after drinking copious amounts of alcohol. With an acting career that peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, Reed was notorious for his macho persona, heavy drinking, and outspoken patriotism. The excessive Reed memorabilia in *The Pub* is a running joke in *Expats*: The Sh!ts show us photographs of tasteless Ollie Reed merchandise and memorabilia that is displayed and sold in *The Pub*. They show images of *The Pub* covered in framed pictures of Ollie Reed, and items including T-Shirts, mugs, beer mats and tea towels with Reed's face on them. Becca and Louise wear the T-shirts that the staff wear in *The Pub*, which has Reed's final excessive drinks order printed on the back with the word 'LEGEND' at the bottom of the shirt.⁴⁹

Tourists flock to *The Pub* because of the association to Reed, and the Sh!ts chat to expats who see him as an 'absolute legend'.⁵⁰ Despite Reed's alcoholism proving deadly, his drinking is glamourised and capitalized on by *The Pub* for profit, and his 'legendary status' is tied to his hell-raiser image, sexist views, and

embodiment of a bygone archetype of English masculinity. The relationship between his drinking and his outwardly misogynistic views is illustrated through a framed quotation of Reed's, which hangs in The Pub: 'I have two ambitions in this life: one is to drink in every pub, the other is to sleep with every woman on earth'. Although The Pub's obsession with Reed is framed as comedic in *Expats*, the audience are compelled to see double: the ridiculously over the top and silly remembrance of Reed alongside his self-sabotaging, deadly alcoholism and overtly sexist views.

Pugliese argues in relation to Christmas Island that 'spectacular sunsets, sparkling waters and serviced luxury – all effectively work to disappear the squalor and suffering of the immigration prison just over the horizon'.⁵¹ I argue that the excessive signification of 'Englishness' evident in The Pub through alcohol, Ollie Reed merch, flags, and binge drinking, means that the migrant suffering occurring near The Pub 'becomes invisibilized and unintelligible within the enframing discourse of Western tourism'.⁵² More than just invisibilizing this suffering, the over-signification of English, white patriarchal masculinity works to secure racial and gendered hegemonic hierarchies which insist the English exceptionalism of the expats compared to the non-white, non-European migrants, which, in turn, continues to upload violent border regimes.

Seeing double: staging the heterotopia

This final section analyses Sh!t Theatre's dramaturgical engagement with alcohol in more detail, and how it compels audiences to see double: the fun and the horrifying, the inexplicably juxtaposed 'side by side'.⁵³ In her article on the interrelation between migrancy and excess, Marilena Zaroulia asks 'what do we see when we encounter images of migration? How do we look and how do we see all these images that are circulated in excessive manners?'.⁵⁴ This article similarly asks how we encounter performances about migrancy, and I propose seeing double as a strategy for audiences to comprehend and critically engage with this work. My concept of seeing double is in conversation with other thinkers who consider different ways of seeing performance. These include Simon Bayly's concept of 'pathognomy', which relies on glancing, glimpsing, and 'hunting' elusive traces in performance rather than considering its whole, and Maaïke Bleeker's critical engagement with the politics of visibility and 'looking' at performance.⁵⁵ Joe Parslow's 'queer side-eye' methodology is a key reference here, as they consider nonfrontal modes of looking at drag performance which involve 'not looking straight' as a political positionality and as a way to read performance literally from the side to see it anew.⁵⁶

To demonstrate the potential of seeing double as a method for performance analysis, this section draws more explicitly on my own spectatorial experience of watching *Expats* to consider alcohol in performance as an embodied, relational practice. In *Expats*, the idea of seeing double speaks to the state of intoxication the Sh!ts embody that literally causes blurred vision and a shift in consciousness that might reveal different ways of seeing. Alongside this, seeing double means witnessing the hilarity of Becca and Louise playing along with and laughing at the laddish drinking of the expats in The Pub that takes place so close to migrant death and is implicated within it.

Near the start of the production, after introducing us to the community at The Pub, the Sh!ts get the audience on their feet to do a toast to Ollie Reed. They offer us shots of rum, and toast: 'ONE FOR THE PEASANTS!' to mimic what Reed would say at The Pub as he bought everyone a drink.⁵⁷ Immediately after Becca and Louise and members of the audience who have chosen to take the shot drink it, the rowdy music that was playing switches to the 'rhythmic ebb and flow of waves . . . and the sombre dong of a low bell – like a death-knell'.⁵⁸ Becca and Louise sit among the crowd as an image appears on the back wall of a boat sinking. This is accompanied by the Sh!ts reporting on a shipwreck alert near the coast of Malta, where 117 people had drowned after a boat capsized at sea. These stark contrasts from fun to devastating punctuate the play, but the embodied engagement of audience members drinking rum at this moment is particularly significant.

What does it mean to offer audience members a shot of rum in *Expats* as a celebratory toast? When I had a shot of rum during the performance, I had a visceral response: I shivered, pulled a face, and the sharp taste lingered for several minutes after the toast. The rum both literally and metaphorically left a bad taste in my mouth, as the experience of consuming the rum was almost directly followed by images and news reports of migrant boats capsizing at sea. Rum has a specific history that supports The Pub's position as a colonial export. Caribbean historian Tara Inness states that in the eighteenth century 'the machinery of rum

production ... was almost exclusively done by enslaved Africans'.⁵⁹ Produced in British colonies, such as Barbados, rum was a highly sought after commodity by the British during this period. Through extractive, violent, and exploitative practices of slave labour, by the end of the eighteenth century the British Empire was the biggest producer and consumer of rum globally.

Moreover, from the seventeenth century, the British Navy began issuing the rum ration, otherwise known as the 'tot' to sailors and was not abolished until 1970. As Tom Colls states 'staggeringly, until 1740 the daily ration was half a pint of neat rum, twice a day'.⁶⁰ Thus, not only is rum a colonial export, traded for goods and land and a considerable economic commodity for the British Empire, it is also ideologically tied to imperialist narratives and a central facet of British (military) identity. Sailors drinking copious amounts of rum daily and then inflicting the violence of colonial rule reinforces the connection between alcohol and systems of harm. Rum was used to 'lift the spirits' of the sailors – to keep them going and boost morale. In this sense, the collective drinking of alcohol directly supported the subjugation and oppression of enslaved people by the British empire. To return to the gendered qualities of nationalism, Galpin argues that the 'defence of British sovereignty is built on patriarchal hierarchies of male strength, power, and toughness' and the normalization of excessive drinking cultures was one way this militarized masculinity was used to maintain imperial domination.⁶¹ The joviality of the toast exists alongside these violent historical associations, and Sh!t Theatre intentionally play with the discomfort caused through this paradoxical relation to prompt critical reflection from audiences.

Throughout the production, the audience see how Becca and Louise use alcohol to drown their thoughts and feelings about what they uncover on their journey. Becca and Louise consistently reference how much they drink, and it is a lot. As they digitally track a migrant boat's progress across the Mediterranean to Malta via a Maltese radio channel and social media updates, they are drinking pints of Cisk (a popular Maltese beer) in The Pub. On the day they are set to perform the show they have created for Valletta's City of Culture in The Pub, they tell us that 'we've been working really hard, we haven't got drunk in days'.⁶² We are shown clips of Becca and Louise doing shots after their performance in The Pub that they barely remember. The comparison between Reed's excessive drinking and Becca and Louise's is made evident, and more than this, they blur into each other.

By the end of the show, the Sh!ts are spiralling out of control themselves as they reckon with this parallel reality in Malta. In the final sequence, Becca and Louise stand centre stage and pour a giant bottle of water over themselves. On the side of the bottle are the words 'OH DEAR GOD', which we have been told earlier in the show represents a highly alcoholic drink made by one of the barmen at The Pub. As they pour the bottle of water over themselves, they try to drink the contents but end up spluttering and choking on it. Watching them struggle and battle with the water falling onto them not only indicates the dangers of their relationship with alcohol, but also conjures images of drowning, emphasized by Becca and Louise wearing life jackets.

In this final affective climax, our attention is drawn to the dark reality of Reed's alcoholism through Sh!t Theatre's embodiment of his actions. Becca and Louise perform and impersonate Reed's drunken dancing and singing from his appearance on a talk show in 1987. Treated as a joke by many at the time, Reed's tortuous lurching is much more legible now as concerning. Sh!t Theatre visibly demonstrate the danger and recklessness of Reed's alcoholism through their mimicking of his movements, but they also *become* Ollie Reed in that moment. As they imitate Reed's dancing, the sequence gets faster. Their bodies are contorted and distorted, as they try to fill the space of Ollie Reed with their smaller bodies: their stances are wide and their movements strange, rigid, out of place. At the same time, the life jackets continue to bring representations of migrancy to the forefront. The audience therefore see Becca and Louise, Ollie Reed, and migrant death together in an entanglement.

While Becca and Louise are dancing, they are soaking wet, their face paint dripping off, with buckets on their heads: they have blinded themselves with alcohol, or perhaps blinded themselves from seeing what they have uncovered in Malta. The lighting design consists of dark blue hues with flashes of lightning-like bright light. The back wall is flooded with glitchy images and videos including Ollie Reed dancing, karaoke, news reports of the golden passport scheme, capsized boats – all stitched together. Becca and Louise describe this section in the stage directions as 'nightmarish flashes, like memories that come back to you in between drunken blackouts when you're Ollie Reed level wasted'.⁶³ At the end of this sequence, Becca and Louise fall to the floor face down. As the lights dim, the bright orange of their life jackets is all that is visible.

There is a political and aesthetic correlation for an audience to the ‘refugee crisis’ which is summoned by the life jackets.⁶⁴ As Zaroulia states in relation to Ai Weiwei’s installation performance *Safe Passage* (2016) which displayed 14,000 life jackets, ‘each one of the life vests stands in for the person who is no longer there and who remains invisible, having perished while crossing or having chosen other forms of invisibility as they attempt to arrive at their final European destination’.⁶⁵ Sh!t Theatre draw on references that audiences will have seen in ‘excess’ in the media to show themselves in relation to the migrant body in complex and uncomfortable ways. While Zaroulia argues that Weiwei’s performance demonstrates the excess of wasted life through the piled-up life jackets, Becca and Louise perform excess through their movement, the sound scape, the blur of images on the screen, and their excessive drinking.

After a beat, we are suddenly pulled back to The Pub as Becca and Louise get up and an audio recording of a barman shouts ‘time at the bar!’.⁶⁶ I argue Sh!t Theatre intentionally juxtaposed these sections to establish the explicit connection between the self-serving attitude of the expats at The Pub, and the lack of care and responsibility shown to the migrants who suffer due to highly bordered European states and border violence literally metres away from where the Expats get drunk and socialize. In Sh!t Theatre’s engagement with alcohol and through their contrasting dramaturgy, they stage the qualities of Foucault’s heterotopia: these incompatible sites and experiences are held within the same time and space. Seeing double is therefore a strategy of witnessing which attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible. It compels audiences to recognize and reckon with the everyday prevalence of these juxtaposed realities of fun and horror, drinking and drowning, life and death, and the systemic injustices of these configurations.

Conclusion

Expats concludes with Becca and Louise describing their easy, calm, care-free journey back to the UK from Malta. They describe spreading out on the plane, ordering a cold glass of white wine and a gin and tonic. When Becca has trouble with her passport, the airport staff are helpful and kind. When they reach the UK, they look up to the clear sky: ‘we go our separate ways, to our separate homes’.⁶⁷ Becca and Louise (and others in the audience who share their privilege) benefit from ‘a system of sovereignty and bordered spaces’ in which they can comfortably travel home while others are forced to take dangerous journeys to evade or escape Europe’s border controls.⁶⁸ Ending on this note of privilege, which is conveyed through alcohol: the fizzing of Becca’s gin and tonic, or Louise’s ice-cold wine, highlights the interdependent configurations between drinking cultures and migrancy as well as the political uses of deploying alcohol in performance to explore these issues.

For two consecutive summers in the UK – 2024 and 2025 – we have seen far-right riots across England, which specifically target hotels housing asylum seekers. What struck me about the media reporting of these racist riots, was how much alcohol was a key facet of the gathering of far-right extremists who inflicted terror, violence, and intimidation on migrant, Muslim, and other Global Majority communities. Images and videos of predominantly white men smashing beer bottles into fires with their shirts off and draped in St. George’s flags were not dissimilar to images of football hooligans trashing the streets of foreign countries they visit for football tournaments. The recent (Summer 2025) iteration of flag display across England, in which St. George’s crosses appeared on roundabouts and lampposts in excess, demonstrates the urgent need to continue to interrogate Englishness as an anti-immigrant ideology. Furthermore, research has shown a high correlation between those arrested during the riots and those with previous domestic abuse convictions, thus exposing the connection made in this article between nationalism and patriarchal violence.⁶⁹

Through analysing Sh!t Theatre’s dramaturgical engagement with alcohol in *Expats*, I propose that interrogating alcohol in performance is one way to expose how seemingly neutral acts of drinking are entangled within systems of power. Specifically, by creating a complex and messy critique which draws connections between drinking, gendered nationalism, and migrancy, Sh!t Theatre invite the audience to ‘see double’ and consider our relationality to the violence inflicted on those at the sharp end of border violence. There is scope for further expansion of seeing double as a methodology for analysing performance which uses alcohol or other substances on stage, as it proposes a way of engaging with the real and the representational at the same time. In *Expats*, the embodied and relational qualities of alcohol mean that audiences have the potential to see their experiences and privileges of drinking, leisure, and tourism as

connected to border violence. More broadly, I propose that seeing double could be deployed to analyse the ethics and aesthetics of performances which stage juxtaposition in form and content. It is my hope that seeing double might offer a way to stick with the complexities, ethical messiness, and difficulty of politically challenging theatre so that we can stay with the tensions that make this work valuable.

Notes

1. I use the word 'migrant' in this article as an over-arching term to describe people migrating for any reason. There are important distinctions between migrant, asylum seeker, and refugee, and I follow Marilena Zaroulia who argues, 'this is not to dismiss the importance of distinguishing between refugees and other kinds of migrants; however, in the face of rising xenophobia and racist violence against non-white men and women who have crossed borders, it is important not to imply that certain kinds of migrants are "real", suffer more and are worth protecting more than others'. (Marilena Zaroulia, 'Performing That Which Exceeds Us: Aesthetics of Sincerity and Obscenity During "The Refugee Crisis"', *Research in Drama Education, The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 23, 2 (2018), pp. 179–92, here p. 190.) Similarly, Ella Parry-Davis uses the term migrant 'as a means of working against value judgments that would seek to differentiate between those migrants "deserving" and "undeserving" of state protections'. (Ella Parry-Davis, 'Immigration Infrastructure Theatricalised in *Illegalised* and *The Claim*', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 31, 4 (2021), pp. 409–21, here p. 410.)
2. Michel Foucault 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16, 1 (1986), pp. 22–27, here p. 22.
3. Foucault, p. 22.
4. Until his death in 2023, Adam Brace was Sh!t Theatre's long-term director and dramaturg and had a significant influence on their work. He directed eight of Sh!t Theatre's shows, including *Expats*.
5. Sh!t Theatre, *Sh!t Theatre Drink Rum with Expats* (London: Oberon Books, 2019), p. 33.
6. Ava Wong Davies, *exeunt*, 2019, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/edinburgh-fringe-review-sht-theatre-drink-rum-expats/>, accessed 10 December 2021.
7. Chloe Rae Edmonson, 'Under the Influence: Drinking and Immersion in New York City Theatre and Popular Entertainment, 1850 to Present', University of New York, PhD Thesis, 2018, p. vi.
8. Jim Drobnick, 'Inebriationism: Alcohol, Performance and Paradox', *Performance Research*, 22, 6 (2017), pp. 26–42, here p. 27.
9. Mark Jayne, Gill Valentine, and Sarah L. Holloway, *Alcohol, Drinking, Drunkenness: (Dis)Orderly spaces* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 5.
10. Sarah Gorman, 'Seriously Drunk: Anders Harm and Wendy Houstoun fall "under the influence"', *Performance Research*, 23, 4–5 (2018), pp. 29–33, here p. 31.
11. Parry-Davis, p. 419.
12. While a comparative analysis of audience reception in each country *Expats* was performed in is beyond the scope of this article, it is likely that this production will have been received differently at different points in its production history, for example, when it was performed at the Edinburgh Fringe festival in 2019. The show has since toured internationally, but never in Malta, apart from some kind of work-in-progress performance which was staged in The Pub as part of the Valetta Capital of Culture which is referred to in *Expats* itself.
13. Parry-Davis, p. 419.
14. Parry-Davis, p. 410.
15. While I do not have the scope to go into the experience of *Expats* for those audiences in this article, I unpack the affective responses and ethical considerations in much more depth in my upcoming monograph via audience research methodologies. Isabel Stuart, *Affective Encounters in Feminist Performance: Audience, Feminism, Feelings* (Routledge: forthcoming).
16. This thinking about who the audience is presumed to be in performances about migrancy and who these shows are for is part of a wider conversation taken up by many scholars of migrancy performance. These include Parry-Davis and Zaroulia referenced elsewhere, as well as Kate Elswit in 'Performing Anti-Nationalism: Solidarity, Glitter and No-Borders Politics with the Europa Europa Cabaret', *Theatre Research International*, 43,1 (2018), pp. 25–44 and Emma Welton in 'Welcome to The Jungle: Performing Borders and Belonging in Contemporary British Migration Theatre', *Theatre Research International* 45, 3 (2020), pp. 230–44.
17. Harriet Curtis, *Mess in Contemporary Performance* (London: Routledge, 2024), p. 3.
18. It is important to acknowledge the very real consequences and ethical issues of using alcohol in performance for both performers and audiences. Performance artist FK Alexander discusses how the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (where *Expats* was originally staged) ignores issues of addiction and alcoholism in their thinking about access, and how alcohol in performance has become a regular part of fringe performance, making it inaccessible and harmful for those living with addiction. FK Alexander, *The Sick of The Fringe*, 2019, <https://thesickofthefringe.com/prognoses/edinburgh19fk#>, accessed 23 April 2022.
19. Curtis, p. 14.
20. Foucault, p. 22.

21. Joseph Pugliese, 'Crisis Heterotopias and Border Zones of the Dead', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23, 5 (2009), pp. 663–79, here p. 644.
22. Pugliese, p. 644.
23. Foucault, p. 25.
24. Sh!t Theatre, p. 22.
25. This game holds historical significance as Poland secured a 1–1 draw, which prevented England from qualifying for the 1974 World Cup finals. This result ended England's streak of qualifying for every World Cup since 1950. This defeat has been categorized as an 'end of an era' for English football, and a moment of national shame and collective 'trauma' in football history.
26. Sh!t Theatre, p. 1.
27. My engagement with Maltese history and culture is led by how Sh!t Theatre represent Malta in the production from their positionality as English young women performance makers. It is important however to understand the unique position of Malta in British colonial history, its impact on Maltese national identity, and to nuance why the English expats feel 'at home' in a former colony. For further reading in this area, see Mitchell, Jon P. 'Looking Forward to the Past: National Identity and History in Malta'. *Identities*, 10, 3 (2003), pp. 377–98 and Frendo, Henry. 'Intra-European Colonial Nationalism: The Case of Malta, 1922–1927', *Melita Historica* 11, 1 (1992), pp. 79–93.
28. Leah Cowan, *Border Nation* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), p. 6.
29. It is important to distinguish the different types of expats who come to Malta. While some expats, who have formally been almost exclusively British until recently, come to live in Malta and participate in the everyday life of the country, another category are those who pay for a Maltese passport in order to access other places in Europe (for example, tax havens). This 'golden passport' scheme, which is referenced in the play and has subsequently been cut short by European Union legislation, played a role in the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia for exposing this corrupt practice.
30. Pugliese, p. 670.
31. Michael Dietler, 'Alcohol as Embodied Material Culture', in *Alcohol and Humans: A Long and Social Affair*, edited by Kimberley Hockings and Robin Dunbar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 115–129, here p. 115.
32. Gemma Edwards, 'This Is England 2021: Staging England and Englishness in Contemporary Theatre', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 9, 2 (2021), pp. 281–303, here p. 287.
33. Michael Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 21.
34. Gemma Edwards, p. 301.
35. Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (London: Hodder & Stoughton (2004), p. 88, emphasis in original).
36. See Thomas Thurnell-Reed, 'It's a Small Little Pub, but Everybody Knew Everybody': Pub Culture, Belonging and Social Change', *Sociology*, 58, 2 (2023), pp. 420–436.
37. Amit Singh, Sivamohan Valluvan, and James Kneale, 'A Pub for England: Race and Class in the Time of the Nation', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 28, 1 (2024), pp. 156–76, here p. 160. English exceptionalism is evident in the positioning of the pub as a uniquely English space, despite the centrality of pubs in Irish culture, for example. This demonstrates a kind of colonial one-upmanship in English national attitudes.
38. Singh, Valluvan, and Kneale, p. 163.
39. Singh, Valluvan, and Kneale, p. 162.
40. Sh!t Theatre, p. 115.
41. Sh!t Theatre, pp. 44–47. It is interesting to note that when I watched the show at Soho Theatre in London in 2021 on seven occasions, the line about English people being spat at in Malta was always met with groans and laughter from the audience which I interpreted as a disbelieving response. The way in which Sh!t Theatre position the audio recordings of the expats means that the audience hear their perspective, but the satirical politics of the production does not position everything they say as true.
42. See Columba Achilleos-Sarll and Benjamin Martill, 'Toxic Masculinity: Militarism, Deal-Making and the Performance of Brexit', in Moira Dustin, Nuno Ferreira, and Susan Millns, eds., *Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 15–44.
43. Charlotte Galpin, 'Anglo-British Exceptionalism, and the European 'Other': White Masculinities in Discourses of British National Identity', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 26, 2 (2023), pp. 375–401, here p. 375.
44. Galpin, p. 381 citing Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994).
45. Galpin, p. 375.
46. Moreover, it is often migrants who will clear up the mess afterwards, in the form of devalued, low-paid work.
47. Steve Frosdick and Peter Marsh, *Football Hooliganism* (London: Willan Publishing, 2005), p. 1.
48. Ramón Spaaij, 'Men Like Us, Boys Like Them: Violence, Masculinity, and Collective Identity in Football Hooliganism', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 32, 4 (2008), pp. 369–92, pp. 377–80.
49. The drinks order was 'eight pints of lager, half a bottle of whiskey, and twelve double rums', Sh!t Theatre, p. 57.
50. Sh!t Theatre, p. 51.
51. Pugliese, p. 673.

52. Pugliese, p. 673.
53. Foucault, p. 22.
54. Zaroulia, p. 189.
55. Simon Bayly, *A Pathognomy of Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008),
56. Joe Parslow, *Their Majesty: Drag Performance and Queer Communities in London* (London: Routledge, 2025), p. 9.
57. Sh!t Theatre, p. 64.
58. Sh!t Theatre, p. 64.
59. Marc Fennell, Nick Baker and Zoe Ferguson, ABC Radio National, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-26/the-history-of-rum-stuff-the-british-stole/102604072>, accessed 22 June 2025.
60. Tom Colls, Today Programme, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/today/newsid_8859000/8859506.stm, accessed 21 June 2025.
61. Galpin, p. 381.
62. Sh!t Theatre, pp. 96–97.
63. Sh!t Theatre, p. 99.
64. The term ‘refugee crisis’ has been critiqued by migrant justice activists and scholars of migration. It is not a politically neutral term: it is language deployed by Western governments to categorize a huge range of migrant movement as a solvable ‘crisis’ rather than a series of intentional and cruel policies which governments continue to enact despite knowing the harm it causes. As Zaroulia states: ‘the system is always in crisis’. Zaroulia, p. 190.
65. Zaroulia, p. 185.
66. Sh!t Theatre, p. 115.
67. Sh!t Theatre, p. 119.
68. Zaroulia, p. 182.
69. Nic Murray and Syal Rajeev, *The Guardian*, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jul/26/two-in-five-arrested-for-last-summer-uk-riots-had-been-reported-for-domestic-abuse>, accessed 7 November 2025.

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