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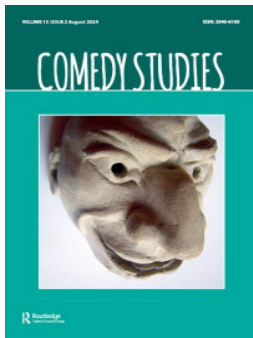
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# Cabaret and decency: how contemporary definitions of cabaret are shaped by censorship

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# Cabaret and decency: how contemporary definitions of cabaret are shaped by censorship

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## ABSTRACT

The abundant 'cabaret' events that populate London's contemporary entertainment scene strategically adopt specific structures and aesthetics. Common points of reference include the Weimar Republic, Berlin clubs of the 1920s, 'salacious' female nudity, 'outrageous' camp reveals and inevitable references to Bob Fosse's 'Cabaret'. The events often promise to provide a 'high quality' drinking and dining experience. In this way 'nostalgia' can be turned into financial success. This formulaic approach defines the contemporary understanding of cabaret, omitting vital aspects of the genre while turning it into a purely commercial commodity. My artistic practice as research interrogates the experimental nature of the cabaret of late nineteenth century Paris within a contemporary British context. Setting itself apart from the allure of 'flesh and cash' of the West End cabaret, *Ms. Paolini's Phantasmagoria Cabaret*, regularly programmed at Hoxton Hall, London, since 2016, focuses on exploring an updated experience of European cabaret within the abandoned British Music Hall and Variety tradition. The wider cultural discourse fails to report on the possibility of different approaches to cabaret. I will draw on particular examples from my practice – how a 60-something performer clad in Y-fronts, for example, was regarded by a certain audience as obscene – to explore the subtleties of contemporary censorship and what it says about our cultural landscape. The 'body reveal' – one of the commercial selling points of West End cabaret replica productions – becomes unacceptable in the different context of *Ms. Paolini's Phantasmagoria Cabaret*. This article examines how censorship operates in relation to contemporary experimental cabaret, providing an alternative account of the contemporary development of traditional cabaret and suggesting that there are different angles from which to approach discussion of the genre.

## KEYWORDS

cabaret; censorship;  
self-censorship; high  
- low culture;  
experimental

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to bring the reader's attention to current perceptions of Cabaret in the UK. It aims to contribute to the wide-ranging conversation concerning the way in which the interpretation of the genre appears to have

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Decency and Cabaret

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become a commercially sexed-up and nostalgic version of the original. These on-going commercial cabaret productions conspire to obliterate any accurate recollection of the original form, which is characterised by artistic experimentation, 'a certain elitist character' (Segel 1987, xv) and critical satire of the establishment. From the beginning, cabaret appeared as a 'more intellectual and self-consciously artistic form' – a sort of platform, as Appignanesi says, for artists 'to exchange work and ideas with one another'. It emerged, she says, 'either as a laboratory, a testing ground for young artists who often deliberately advertised themselves as an avant-garde, or as the satirical stage of contemporaneity, a critically reflective mirror of topical events, morals, politics and culture. In the best instances, it was both' (Appignanesi 1984, 12).

Another striking aspect of cabaret was an urgent restlessness and desire for change:

When cabaret first emerged in turn-of-the-century Europe, in most instances on the initiative of artists themselves, it was an outgrowth of far-reaching transition in society and art; not only did it reflect and participate in that transition, it emerged from it as perhaps the most characteristic form of a dissolution of old structures which necessarily preceded the advent of the new (Segel 1987, xxiv).

As it stands, none of those aspects seems to be identifiable in current cabaret productions in the UK. The 'commercial' cabaret, as I call it, offers high production value shows whose contents are re-propositions of specific cabaret productions of the past. These characteristics generate a nostalgic desire and ultimately determine its high demand. Much less visible than the former is what I also call 'experimental cabaret', referring to the experimental aspect of the original cabaret. Through experimentation, the latter aims to use the form to explore contemporary issues and needs, and to criticise the contemporary establishment and society by embracing fundamental aspects of the original cabaret. As such, experimental cabaret operates as a critical artistic and cultural expression of the form itself, of the context in which it operates, and of the wider society. The complete dominance of commercial over experimental determines the current perception of cabaret.

As a practitioner aiming to define her own approach to the genre, my work being encompassed within cabaret, I propose to consider contemporary perceptions of the form. I believe that by identifying and comprehending the various mechanisms that shape contemporary perceptions, I will become aware not just of what informs them but also of what activates my practice. The core content of this article has emerged from critical analysis of my practice, with particular emphasis on *Ms. Paolini's Phantasmagoria Cabaret (MPPC)* – a work that is the culmination of twenty-five years of a performance-making career in the UK. Described in 2011 by an audience member, as 'deconstructed cabaret', I consider it as an example of 'experimental cabaret'. *MPPC*, programmed seasonally at Hoxton Hall – an original, 1863 music hall at the heart of the London's East End – since 2016, has a long history. Originating in 2011 at Goldsmiths College as *Phantasmagoria* in the exegesis that accompanied the practical component of my Master's in performance, it was developed at Battersea Arts Centre as a theatre show about performers' identities, explored through the popular form of cabaret. It was rebranded *Phantasmagoria Cabaret* when it premiered at Hoxton Hall in 2016 in an evening of JPP (Jesus Paolini Park ensemble), featuring segments of my

‘deconstructed cabaret’ and a number of meticulously cast guest acts, headlined by the cult Japanese group – and winners of the Foster’s Edinburgh Comedy God Award 2010 – The Frank Chickens.

It is important to note here that the evolving methodology embodied in *MPPC*, and in my practice as a whole, has the potential to generate new knowledge. The evident parallel between my ‘never-ending distillation process’ (a practice of micro-adjusting performance in response to live audience reaction) and the multi-mode epistemological model for PaR that Nelson’s diagram (Nelson 2022, 46) so efficiently encapsulates, authorizes the practitioner to consider her practice as a source of validated evidence. PaR, which was granted equal status with established academic research methodologies in 2002 (Piccini 2002), validates creative practice as a research tool. Nelson’s (2022) articulation of such methodology – *being-doing-knowing* is a key principle – provides a rigorous support framework within which practitioners can utilize and offer the knowledge they have gained through their reflective practice and analysis. Through such analysis, I aim to demonstrate that contemporary cabaret in the UK – as opposed to the commercial version – retains and develops elements of the original cabaret as identified by Appignanesi; *MPPC* would be an example. Based on the analysis of specific moments in my practice, I will argue that censorship in its current manifestation preserves the establishment from criticism and quashes social and political denunciation by favouring nostalgic productions of cabaret. In short, by the transfer of censorship to the self through the process of anticipation, the market acts as a censor.

## A history of cabaret and censorship

The history of cabaret has been noticeably intertwined with, and perhaps shaped by, the history of censorship. Aiming to work towards a more balanced and, therefore, satisfactory definition of cabaret by depicting key features that the form has shown in different contexts, an illustration of the most significant moments of such ‘intertwinement’ in history is considered. At the time of the very first manifestation of European cabaret, the nineteenth century Music Hall was beginning to morph into the popular tradition of Variety Theatre in Britain. Cabaret ‘began in Paris on 18 November 1881, the year in which the first and most famous cabaret of all, the Chat Noir (Black Cat), was established’ (Segel 1987, xiii); concurrently ‘The evolution from music hall to variety’ in Britain ‘began towards the end of the nineteenth century’ (Double 2012, 39). The ‘rise and spread of what was a veritable cabaret mania throughout Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’ (Segel 1987, xiii) never fully landed in Britain.

The first English cabaret was opened in June 1912, in London’ (ibid). The contemporary British image of cabaret – the object of this exploration – appears to have been clearly delineated then. As Appignanesi reports, ‘The cabaret form had never really taken hold in England, either as a meeting and performance place for writers and artists, or as a centre for satirical dissent’ (Appignanesi 1984, 164). The British equivalent of the European cabaret ‘with an energy as eclectic and innovatory as to delight The Black Cat of its ancestry’ (1984) only emerges in the early sixties with *Beyond the Fringe*, a 1961 cabaret style revue, and The Establishment, a genuine cabaret theatre that opened in Soho in the same year. Their distinctive innovative force and vitriolic criticism matched the quintessential spirit of the early cabaret in Paris.

Affinities between British and European popular traditions prior to 1961, when 'The British boom in satire had been launched' (Appignanesi 1984, 179), can be detected in 'the eighteenth century coffee houses, saloon bars and taverns that existed across Europe' (Brain 2023). The 'drinking tavern' was a common ancestor to both Parisian Cabaret, which 'inherits its name from the French wine cellar or tavern' (Appignanesi 1984, 9), and British Music Hall, 'emerged from a primeval swamp of tavern singing ..., customers could eat and drink until the early hours ... while listening ... songs which were sometimes extremely bawdy' (Double 2012, 39). Flourishing as a consequence of 'a new urban working class emerging out of the context of the Industrial Revolution' (Brain 2023), in Britain the drinking taverns were – 'As the alcohol flowed' – the place where 'the lower classes were able to kick back and relax' (ibid). The phenomenon of drinking taverns represents the embodiment of a developing industrial working class culture. As reported by Gareth Stedman Jones (1974), and by Jason Price (2016), this was a period of intense adjustment between the different social classes, with the working class emerging 'for the first time as a coherent social body' (Price 2016, 9). As Stedman Jones describes: 'Working class dominant cultural institutions were not the school, the evening class, the library, the friendly society, the church or the chapel, but the pub, the sporting paper, the race course and the music hall' (1974). It was through a process of containment and reformation, implemented by religious institutions and charities, that the middle-class attempted to eradicate unacceptable habits such as gambling, drinking and sensual pleasures – defining aspects of the working class culture at the time.

One noteworthy trademark is the fact that the origin of British Music Hall was induced by law. As Derrek B. Scott reports, 'The UK's Theatres Act of 1843 (which lasted until 1968) allowed magistrates to grant licences for popular entertainments, such as those that took place in saloons and pubs. Those entertainments developed into music hall' (Scott 2019). In his paper, Scott reports on the music hall as an example 'of a cultural institution in which legal measures, in-house regulations, and unscripted codes of behaviour all come into play' (2019), providing an elucidating account of the multifaceted essence of censorship. Designed to regulate popular entertainment, specifically stating: 'The Lord Chamberlain, however, retained control of theatres of spoken drama, and continued to censor plays before their production' (2019), the 1843 Act did not have any impact on the everlasting division between 'high' and 'low' culture. Different rules, licensing, and responsible juristic bodies, determined by the 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' nature of the cultural activity, were applied to approve productions and exercise control over artistic expression, public behaviour, speech and decency *via* censorship. A brief account of the history of UK Theatre censorship, clearly framing the historic evolution of censorship, is conveniently summarised in the UK Parliament Archive: 'Theatre censorship had existed since the sixteenth century, and a 1737 Act appointed the Lord Chamberlain as official licenser of plays and regulated restrictions on drama'. As Scott reported, the UK Parliament Archive affirms that with the 1843 Theatres Acts not much changed in regard to 'the censorship of plays' and in spite of 'several attempts to amend legislation regarding restrictions of stage performance' throughout the years, eventually 'In 1966, a Joint Committee of both Houses was established' to deal with state control of artistic expression and beyond. The Committee

spent two more years gathering evidence ‘from people in the theatre business, including Peter Hall, Kenneth Tynan and Benn Levy’ to dissipate its concern ‘with freedom of speech in plays and on the stage. Theatre censorship was finally abolished in 1968, providing an end to restrictions which had been in place for over 200 years’ (UK Parliament Archive 2023). With the abolition of censorship both legitimate (proper theatre, drama) and illegitimate (comedy, light entertainment) performance were nominally ‘freed’ from control and restriction imposed by the state law.

At the time of the emergence of Cabaret, in the hands of the Church and charitable organisations, British censorship was focused on controlling and changing the working class behaviour attached to music hall culture: ‘Eventually, the pressure of conforming to good manners and moral standard combined with a more profitable commercial opportunity, reformed music hall which developed into variety’ (Double 2012). On the continent cabaret was not immune from censorship either. In view of Segel’s *Turn-of-the-century Cabaret* (1987), it is easy to foresee how the answer to ‘Now, how do we explain the mercurial rise of cabaret in turn-of-the-century Europe?’ (Segel 1987, xiv) would constitute the reason cabaret had been a primary target of censorship in each European country touched by the phenomenon. At the time cabaret emerged, Europe was under such a heavy grip of social, political and cultural conservatism that ‘Artists and intellectuals felt an overwhelming sense of alienation from a society they chose to view as irretrievably mired in the status quo of convention and tradition’ (Segel 1987, xv). As the nineteenth century was approaching its end, dissatisfaction with the status quo ‘intensified into an urgent restlessness and desire for change’ (ibid), which found its form of expression in cabaret. In response to the ‘growing sense of fragmentation and imminent collapse, artists and intellectuals became increasingly bolder in their questioning—and ultimate rejection—of authority’ (ibid). As a reaction to the jeopardy posed by the emergence of cabaret, ‘increasingly more willing to challenge conventions and traditions’ (Segel 1987, xvi), the institutions of power responded with the repressive force of censorship. Segel, along with reporting and debating in detail the historic, cultural, social and political reasons for and dynamics of cabaret as European phenomenon, provides a country-by-country account of how cabaret, and censorship, as a response, manifested and developed at that time. A common trait: ‘cabaret rapidly developed into a kind of sanctuary within whose privacy and safety barbs could be hurled with impunity at the enemies of authority and philistinism just outside the gates, and forms of art cultivated which by their very nature flouted the accepted and approved’ (ibid) is identified by Segel. As in Poland, where ‘the imperial Hapsburg authorities kept close tabs on private undertakings such as cabarets, making it virtually impossible for the pre-World War I Polish cabaret to mount anything capable of being construed, or misconstrued, as an offense or challenge to Hapsburg authority’ (Segel 1987, xx), throughout Europe, conservative forces intending to keep the status quo would target cabaret, aiming to exercise control *via* censorship.

The historic events functional to the development of cabaret in Germany, often constitute the backdrop of contemporary British cabaret productions. From its beginning – its links to Parisian cabaret, the way it was developed through Munich, Weimar Republic and Berlin phases, and brought to an end by the repressive force of the Nazi – in *Berlin Cabaret* (1996) Peter Jelavich gives a comprehensive account of how the



phenomenon advanced in Germany. A specific aspect of German cabaret was its extreme socio-political and cultural criticism. As Jelavich explains, it was of such relevance that to avoid 'linguistic confusion', the German language differentiates *Cabaret* from *Kabarett*: '... since the 1950s, *Cabaret* has referred to a strip show, while *Kabarett* is reserved for social criticism or political satire' (Jelavich 1996, 1). Crucially, such an important aspect of German cabaret is not embraced by contemporary British cabaret productions. Rather, pursued by the Hollywood commercial machine intended to preserve the popularity of the film *Cabaret*<sup>1</sup>, we get productions mainly characterised by regurgitated features of the film. Along with a number of other iconic features of *Cabaret* [stigmatisation of homosexuality, safety through the escapism of the club, etc] the *Willkommen* tune, unbelievably to this day sung in a mock-German accent, is the guarantee of commercial success.

As incontrovertible and unquestionable as it sounds – 'Theatre censorship was finally abolished in 1968 providing an end to restrictions which had been in place for over 200 years' – the UK Parliament's Archive statement is brought into doubt by Bunn's assertion 'What we believe about censorship often reveals how we understand society and the self' (Bunn 2015). By cutting through the dense articulation of his paper *Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory And After* (2015), it is possible to reconcile the two sources concerning censorship and understand what happened to censorship from its abolition till now. While arguing that historians' doubts about New Censorship Theory originate from their concern 'over the erasure of the specificity of state repressive force' (Bunn 2015), Bunn provides an analysis of New Censorship Theory from its emergence in the latest decades of the twentieth century. New Censorship Theory does not depose 'the dominant liberal conception of censorship' but rather proposes 'to bracket' such liberal 'conception as a separate and ultimately subordinate species of censorship' (2015). This concept of censorship, contrary to its liberal [or typical] notion, does not pay attention to the control executed by state actions, but 'enshrines self-censorship as the paradigm' demoting traditional forms of censorship to 'secondary to impersonal' structures. Bunn explains that New Censorship Theory's central objective has been 'to recast censorship from a negative, repressive force, concerned only with prohibiting, silencing, and erasing, to a productive force that creates new forms of discourse, new forms of communication, and new genres of speech'. Arising as 'a powerful theoretical critique of prevailing notions of censorship and its opposite, free speech' (2015), New Censorship Theory has become central to present day censorship discourse. In his re-examination of its development, Bunn elucidates on the Marxist critique of bourgeoisie civil society, as well as on 'the work of Foucault and Bourdieu in particular' as its direct influencing predecessors. Inevitably, the result is a complex treatment of the issue. To outline the salient aspects: 'State censorship works primarily through its effects on the production of speech, not its distribution'. In fact, when state censors focus on obstructing the 'distribution of unauthorised content' it is because, 'in a broader sense, censorship has failed to 'induce the kind of self-censorship that constitutes a more effective system' (2015). Among the many indirect forces used to regulate expression, this kind of self-censorship illustrates the possibility of "positive" form of press politics' to obtain the same result 'as repressive prohibitions'. By altering the 'field of expression' in this way, censorship leads people 'to tailor their responses' and 'to take account of



how censorship modifies the differential profits to be made from cultural capital'(ibid). Expression is restrained, reorganised by a censorship from the structure of the market, mutated/changed into self-censorship through the process of anticipation. Bunn concludes by suggesting that 'investigations of censorship in the traditional sense must incorporate the insights of newer theories to understand state censors as actors internal to communication networks, and not as external, accidental features' (2015).

These historic developments constitute the background to *MPPC*, which emerges as a distinct rendering of the form. Being described by an audience member as 'deconstructed cabaret' would seem to point to *MPPC*'s distinctive approach to cabaret from its early developments. And, even though an in-depth analysis of 'deconstructed cabaret', comprising the examination of 'deconstructivism' along with Derrida's work and relative studies, will expand this disquisition beyond its scope, it is important to note the significance of such a description. From its very early developments, *MPPC* was regarded as something that 'deals' with cabaret, rather than [something in the fashion of] cabaret. The description 'deconstructed cabaret', facilitated the acknowledgement of this aspect of my work, and gave rise to the process of reflection on and analysis of my practice. This process has helped to identify the distinction between commercial and experimental cabaret. Additionally, through this process, the initial impact of the description 'deconstructed cabaret' has fuelled the micro adjustments of the work itself, establishing that the evolving methodology of my practice holds parallels with PaR. The piece explores and pushes elements of cabaret – contemporary and original – to generate new material relevant to its contemporaneity. The artistic outcome of such exploration and experimentation is a critical expression of the contemporary establishment and society. By understanding the multifaceted aspects of censorship over time, the practitioner, myself, acquires the awareness needed to operate and position her creative decision within the wider social acceptance of expression. Additionally, by understanding the mechanisms of contemporary censorship and production, the practitioner can actively decide how to respond to such mechanism. Ultimately, Bunn's assertion: 'What we believe about censorship often reveals how we understand society and the self' (Bunn 2015) elucidates how the practitioner shapes her practice within her contemporaneity.

### 2023: London cabaret

*Bernie Dieter's Club Kabarett* provides us with the most recent example of the dominant commercial British version of cabaret. It is hosted by the latest cabaret venue to appear in London's Soho: The Underbelly Boulevard. Brian Logan's review (*The Guardian* October 2023) elucidates on what constitutes Britain's erroneous idea of cabaret. Logan begins by recalling the significance of the venue: 'It was one of the birth places of alternative comedy' (Logan 2023). Recently reopened, The Underbelly Boulevard used to be The Boulevard theatre. As well as staging drama, in the eighties, the Boulevard became the riotous home of The Comic Strip, a descendant of the 1961s *The Establishment* and *Beyond The Fringe*. Connected to the innovative and vitriolic satire of the early sixties, The Comic Strip constituted what would eventually be defined as Alternative Comedy. Logan suggests that *Bernie Dieter's Club Kabarett* presents itself as one of 'Soho's seedier nighttime activities' (ibid). The show began,

he says, 'with our fishnetted hostess draped louchely over various men in the audience' (ibid). It is striking how *Bernie Dieter's Club Kabarett*, with reference to Jelavich's assertion 'Kabarett is reserved for social criticism or political satire' (Jelavich 1996, 1), immediately positions itself within the wrong definition. As already discussed, in Europe, 'Cabaret' described a phenomenon of artistic experimentation, intellectual elitism and social-political satire. The term 'Kabarett' illustrates the particularly strong social-political critical turn, on the verge of activism, that cabaret took in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its specificity would suggest that the decision to use the term Kabarett for this particular production was not accidental, as it evokes the ethos of German cabaret. As Logan refers to "'Weimar jazz punk" music/vocal accompaniment' (Ibid) as one of the distinctive elements of the show, it would therefore be plausible to think that a nostalgic evocation of German cabaret could be the production's selling strategy. Logan proceeds to describe the show as 'La Clique-style circus cabaret with sexy stylings' (1996), but if, as Double says, La Clique is a successful example of the 'new-style Variety' (Double 2012, 202), then a Kabarett similar to a new-style Variety appears incongruous. This incongruity is heightened by La Clique fonder Brett Haylock's declaration, 'It is a variety show, and what La Clique did was to speed that up and kind of made it contemporary and sexy' (*The Culture Show*, BBC2 19 August 2008). Variety is an entertainment form, a British phenomenon. This, in combination with 'La Clique' sexual connotations discussed by Haylock and Logan [who refer to it as a comparable example], contradicts the Soho production as Kabarett. From Jelovich, we also know 'Kabarett' is a term used to describe a movement of artists and intellectuals who, through artistic expression, embodied the wider need for change in Germany from a stagnant social, cultural political reality. Diverging from Jelovich's claim is Logan's description: 'There's plenty to enjoy in Bernie Dieter's cabaret, even if I wished we could enjoy it without the affectation of illicit carnality' (Logan 2023), and his disapproval of 'the affectation of illicit carnality' as it fails to 'generate a frisson – but which in this spick-and-span surrounding immediately after work, feels like so much cosplay of the artform's countercultural roots' (2023).

Logan highlights the dominant commercial aspects of British contemporary cabaret by saying: 'Dieter ends the show with a rousing speech celebrating misfits and the right to be different' (ibid). It is delivered in a venue 'with a distinctly corporate vibe', for the ticket price, 'stalls seats at up to £64.50 a pop', would 'rule many a misfit and dissenter out' (ibid). The celebration of diversity, of the outsider, which could potentially resonate with some of the original values of European cabaret, seem here, when declaimed by Bernie of *Bernie Dieter's Club Kabarett*, more like a commercial gimmick. It is not by chance that, with ticket price of minimum £70.00 to £300.00, *Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club* provides another excellent example of cabaret as a commercial enterprise. Accredited with several Olivier Awards, and met with unanimous critical approval which has guaranteed the show's extension from its 2021 opening to 2024, the production's financial gain relies, in the main part, on the popularity of the Emcee. 'When the show starts', says Miriam Gibson 'those willing to part with £250 for front row seats have the opportunity to be sat on by **Jessie Buckley** or have **Eddie Redmayne** steal their cocktail' (Gibson 2022 – 4 stars). This sort of critical approval, inevitably raises questions about the identity of an audience compelled to pay such amounts of money

to experience their cocktail being stolen by a Hollywood star. Akbar's review (*The Guardian* 2021 – also 4 stars) of the remake (yet another) of the original musical *Cabaret*, inextricably linked to the film, describes a number of typical references to the German cabaret which are regurgitated here as a first-rate nostalgic product. Reported as an innovative element, the use of immersive-theatre techniques, being a commercialised phenomenon itself, seems more an element thrown in to provide some sort of cultural value to an otherwise slick and expensive commercial product.

The abundance of cabaret shows on offer in the capital can be detected in the increasing number of devoted sections, titled 'Cabaret', in the numerous guides to art, culture and entertainment events in London. One example would be *Design Your Night*<sup>2</sup>, which distils recommendations from *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Evening Standard*, *Visit Britain* and, under the umbrella of *Best Cabaret In London*, provides a lists of twenty-five cabaret shows, all of which – from the description, photographic and video evidence, reviews, and personal experience – clearly share very similar content, aesthetics and set-ups, as already explored in Logan's review. The erroneous idea of cabaret, once within the productions' contents, then, seems to be fuelled, in large part by, the approximate, incorrect and commercially led discourse around it – or, indeed, the lack of. An example in support of this claim, disseminated by the blog *Head Out*<sup>3</sup>: 'Cabaret shows have a long history, holding slivers of London's culture for centuries ...' which is clearly yet another grossly erroneous piece of information about cabaret history. With a consistently gross approximation of factual evidence, the blog expands on the subject of cabaret, providing information on the meaning of the term, the history, the etiquette: 'when attending a cabaret show in London, never forget your manners'; how to dress: 'Cabaret shows tend to be quite formal occasions and it is important to dress appropriately', and so on.

The analysis of the contemporary British cabaret scene can awake a sense of injustice and frustration. The term 'Cabaret' is used with no regard to its original meaning. As the latest London cabaret production has opened in 'one of the birthplaces of alternative comedy' (Logan 2023) it strikes one as ironic that the Boulevard would host a show sold as Kabarett, which is not even a Cabaret.

## A 60-something performer clad in Y-fronts: obscene!

The most impactful effect of censorship on this practitioner (myself), even if indirectly and *a posteriori*, occurred on the 27<sup>th</sup> April 2023. The material, 'The Balloon Act' and 'Ladies' (otherwise known as 'Shit On Your Face Act'), two extracts from *MPPC*, became the object of a dispute between The Polish Cultural Institute, the client, and Margot Przmieska, the commissioned artist who booked my work as one of the acts of her specifically curated show.

After an extended period of development to tailor the work to the history, tradition and lay-out of Hoxton Hall, the work, eventually called *Ms. Paolini's Phantasmagoria Cabaret (MPPC)*, succeeded in establishing itself as 'ludicrous, light-hearted, at times facetious, preposterously unique and unforgettable'<sup>4</sup>. The so-called uniqueness of the show lies in the intentional subversion of cabaret in its current and erroneous perception. Inspired by the innovative and critical force of past European cabaret, the material I devised, sometimes improvised, with JPP, refers sarcastically to contemporary

mainstream cabaret content and aesthetic. The intention, by satirising mainstream cabaret within the wider artistic/cultural scene, is to highlight the failure of the form to engage with society's contemporary issues, and its re-proposal, instead, of a commercially viable formula based on the nostalgic emulation of cabaret of the German years particularly. Experimentation, socio-political and cultural criticism, often delivered with a surreal quality could recall aspects of cabaret's early days. Another review reported on *MPPC* remarked: 'Not to sound intolerably pretentious, but it smacks a little of the Dada movement's Cabaret Voltaire, which prided itself on chaos, anarchy and experimentation'. Within its loaded intentions, (the reviewer brings attention to being able to mention the Dada movement), the reviewer correctly portrays both cabaret's original traits, and my work. However, as the review proceeds by saying 'Granted this is by no means a traditional cabaret'<sup>5</sup>, the ingrained erroneous perception of cabaret appears clear. My piece is correlated with the chaos, anarchy and experimentation of 'Dada', a specific cabaret movement, but simultaneously described as not traditional cabaret. Evidently, what is considered traditional here does not coincide with the history of cabaret.

The two acts in question were/are performed by JPP ensemble: Buddleia Maslen, Kieron Jecchennis, Nauen Park and myself. The base-costumes – Buddleia and Nauen: black corset, underwear and high heels; Kieron: white vest and Y-fronts underwear, red tie, cowboy boots; myself: a deep red sleeveless unitard shorts, flat ankle boots – have additional elements specific to each act.

**THE BALLOON ACT:** To the Shirley Temple tune *On the good ship lollipop*, Buddleia and Nauen – adding minidresses covered in pink balloons – their limbs and heads popping out of a large bunch of pink balloons, move on stage and identify a male in the audience by flirting with him in a cartoon manner from a distance. Kieron, in Y-fronts pants etc, escorts the chosen audience member on stage whose task is to burst all the balloons. The initial and vaguely sexy reaction of the girls turns into chasing and trapping the man, between the balloons. Music stops, the two girls burst the balloons themselves demonstrating how simple is the task and showing their bodies as a factual thing. Wearing a horse mask and carrying a whip which I would crack, I enter as a horse, whipping in the air to break the scene, clear everyone from the stage and, trotting away, then exit. Buddleia and Nauen by moving and flirting in cartoon manner, covered in pink balloon, emulate commercial entertainment's and society's sexually loaded idea of the female body. Shifting from 'sexy' to acting 'normal' is intended to reveal the real person behind society's general idea of the female body.

**LADIES:** JPP enter in their relative base-costume and stand on stage, each performer behind a preset voluminous white dress and long curly white wig. In unison the four performers put on the corresponding wig and long white dress, but just by sliding the arms through the sleeves. The front of the body is perfectly covered with the long white dress, whereas the back reveals underwear, corset and base-costume. The performers, satirizing high society, then improvise a little talk – 'Lovely'...'Oh so, lovely'...'A drop of champagne?'... leading eventually to: '... Golden Shower!!' 'Glu, glu...'...'Scat-play!' 'What's that?', 'Shit on your face' 'Hu?! WHAT? Shit on my face?' At that line, they all stop, look at the audience and perform the 'face dance': starting from the mouth, a circular movement gradually involving all facial muscles. Exeunt. The intention

here is to satirise those who are in power, and the bigotry of whom adopt high status to appear of being in power.

The censorship of the two acts performed in their entirety was applied ‘a-posteriori’ by the Polish cultural Institute penalising Margot Przmieska, the commissioned artist, with a substantial reduction of the agreed fee and a cessation of the professional relationship between the two parties. Margot was issued with an irrevocable ban from approaching any of the Institute’s personnel. The long process of networking, the effort to reach out and cultivate contacts with relevant personalities, as well as representing the organisation, gained Margot a prestigious association with The Polish Cultural Institute, and some financial benefits. This all is now lost.

Months before the Kinoteka Closing Gala<sup>6</sup> (the event for which Margot got commissioned), Margot Przmieska, based on the fact that she is quite familiar with my work engaged me, as one of the artists performing in the cabaret she specifically produced for the occasion. She chosen the two acts, extracts from my production *MPPC*, and we agreed on my remunerative fee. On the morning of the event, I received a WhatsApp text message from Margot Przmieska saying:

... For tonight let’s leave out obscenities as much as possible...

As my practice does not rely on outraging the audience to convey significance, I do not regard any of my material as obscene. As Margot knew and had chosen the two extracts, the phrasing ‘For tonight let’s leave out obscenities as much as possible,’ was disconcerting. When I asked for clarification, Margot seemed to have become concerned about the conservative values of some of the organizers and audience. In any case, she decided to go ahead with the program.

We delivered the two acts before the interval, as scheduled, and left the venue. Margot who, based on many audience members congratulating her on the work, regarded it as a successful night, was confronted with a very different outcome the following day as the management described it a ‘disastrous evening’. As Margot reported, among the long list of complaints – performers in corsets and pants, the phrase ‘Golden Shower’, a middle-aged woman wearing a horse mask and cracking a whip regarded as too sexually explicit – the event’s organizers were outraged by the sight of an over-sixties man in a white vest and ‘dirty’ pants. The sight of Kieron, a senior male in white vest and white Y-fronts underpants, was described as ‘traumatising’ for it had become a recurring nightmare for one of the event’s organizers. Even if the whole instance, and reaction was very specific to a Polish instance, and I myself was blameless, the event compelled me to examine how my creative work could be regarded as offensive and obscene by viewers in a Polish club in South Kensington in London in 2023.

I will focus on what was reportedly regarded as the worst obscenity: the Y-Fronts pants. Aiming to approach the issue with some clarity, I will begin by providing an account of how I and my ensemble JPP came to conceive the costume for that character, and why. From its inception, the show, *MPPC* had been conceived, and consequently developed as a strategic tribute to what [I thought] was commonly understood as Variety and Cabaret. Showgirls in corsets, mini-shorts and high heels is an image that seems to be commonly identified when referring to those genres; feathers, and possibly glitter, come to mind as well. The female performers in *MPPC* emulate such

images, even if with intended variations. The shorts could be ambiguously too long, the corsets more like tank tops. I, a middle-aged woman with a body that does not conform to the showgirl cliché, wear a sleeveless unitard and shorts. Kieron is the only male in the ensemble; he joined JPP and the show as a regular collaborator in later years, when the aesthetics of the piece were already established. Somehow, the white vest and y-fronts underwear, conveying a male vintage sort of look, perhaps expected to be worn by males of Kieron's age, became an interesting option as it would complement [the same level of body exposure] and at the same time contrast [slightly pathetic v slightly sexy, white v black] with the female look. The cowboy boots were Kieron's suggestion, and it was a good solution because every other type of shoe in combination with the white outfit looked too miserable. The red tie was a late addition, which I believe, besides adding some colour, brought different interpretative suggestions about the character. Kieron's outfit was the result of a carefully thought through process. The intentions were: to mirror the cliché of the female body associated with entertainment [commercial cabaret], to bring some vulnerability and ridicule to the view of the mature male who we believe has been largely responsible for shaping the parameters of the female body in entertainment, to show the reality of older bodies [Kieron and mine] and to let the viewers deal with the prejudice against old-age, to play with the reality of our identities, to have fun. All these ideas seem to have bypassed the Ogino's club management's perception, as the only thing seen was 'a man in dirty underwear', an image in recurring nightmares. To be precise, the Y-fronts were not dirty, as they were a new piece of theatrical costume. Why were they described as dirty? And what would be the reason to have nightmares about a pair of y-fronts being, allegedly, dirty? Was this view and judgment on this particular aspect of Kieron's character common to most of the audience present that night? Many more questions could follow.

A few months before the Y-Fronts occurrence, a relatable episode – it manifested a posteriori, complaints were towards a male body [naked on stage] – of censorship was directed towards a guest act of *MPPC*. The performing poet Ernesto Sarezale, who typically works with his naked body, performed three poems. Ernesto entered the stage fully dressed and performed the first poem; during the second poem he began to undress in a very straightforward way, as any ordinary person would; at the time he delivered the third poem he was completely naked. The content of his poetry concerns sex and homosexuality, and varies in its explicit nature. My fascination with his work lies in the beauty of this explicitly sexual language performed by an ordinary, average looking man in the nude. Naked bodies in theatre and live performance are not so uncommon. During the years of programming of *MPPC* I hosted, on a number of occasions, Glory Pearl, a female poet who, like Ernesto, delivers her poetry in the nude. I never had any complaints. But in this occasion, I was questioned about my show's 'daring' material by the newly appointed Hoxton Hall director who, during the sensitive process of assessing the work of artists he inherited with the venue, was trying to get a sense of *MPPC* in order to decide whether to continue its inclusion in the programme. It was only then that I became indirectly aware that someone in the venue had reported to the new artistic director that there was inappropriate material in my production defining it as 'daring'. The conversation was very tense and sensitive. I did not want to lose the venue I had been programmed in since 2016. As well, the new director was

not in a position to reveal too many details about the complaint. Even more difficult was trying to understand what would be the best way forward. I expressed my view on the matter by saying that a show that is a cabaret programmed on a Saturday night should be expected to have challenging material, and that all warnings were in place anyway. Not knowing what would have been the newly appointed director's views on the material, I can understand he must have been in an awkward situation within the organisation he was just starting to get to know. They asked me to communicate full details, in future, of all the material in my shows to be programmed there. It is with a sense of unease that ahead of the showing I describe my material, as requested, with particular attention to minimising and managing what they may perceive as a risk.

The two events reveal that male nudity can be regarded as unacceptable and 'obscene'. Specifically, body reveals and nudity become unacceptable in the way they are performed, and depending on the age of the male performer. The initial discomfort about Margot's message, was the first sign of the impact of censorship I experienced. Following this, the awareness of the penalty suffered by Margot, and the difficulties experienced by Hoxton Hall's director and the consequent restrictions on my work, created the condition for self-censorship of myself, the practitioner. This succession of events explicates the mechanism of censorship endorsed by New Censorship Theory. Also, compared to 2023 cabaret productions in London, it raises questions about the apparent double standards applied to gender, age and performance style of commercial versus experimental cabaret.

Considering New Censorship Theory, the experienced censorship [a posteriori] has evidenced that I must have applied self-censorship throughout my practice, except in those instances. As I had never experienced such impactful complaints before, it can be assumed that my practice operated within society's boundaries of decency, or, as Bunn (2015) suggests, that I must have been led 'to tailor' my work to what is regarded as acceptable by indirect, external forces who regulate expression. Undoubtedly, since censorship was experienced 'a posteriori', it has greatly affected my creative process. The crucial difference between intended and accidental offence, is the practitioner's awareness of and decision to create such effects. The fact that I was not expecting such reaction to my work because I did not provoke with intent, has had a significant impact on my practice. I have been questioning how important it is for me to retain control over the impact of my material on the viewers. Since those events, I have been adopting a much more thorough and frequent scrutiny of my practice, my principles and my ability to retain control over my work and its intentions. A constant interrogation of my creative output has become integral my creative self, though with no clear indication yet to what extent this is beneficial to my practice. Although, according to New Censorship Theory, self-censorship may bring the practitioner in direct dialogue with the values of contemporary society, based on my experience, it can also inhibit the creative process and potentially undermine the practitioner's work and their role within it.

## Conclusion

The first observation to arise from an analysis of contemporary perceptions of cabaret in the UK is the double standards applied to gender, age and performance style within



the two variations of contemporary cabaret. The development of the 'Y-Fronts' and 'Naked Poet' incidents – censorship 'a posteriori' – seems to strongly suggest that an older male body reveal (Kieron Jecchinis in Y-Fronts outfit) is not only unacceptable but also regarded as obscene. The body reveal of young females in commercial cabaret, however, is a common, accepted and promoted trait. Similarly, while the nudity of Glory Pearl, a female poet, was never mentioned, the nudity of Ernesto, a male poet, was reported as inappropriate. The unassuming, straightforward performance of the two extracts in question, intended to show the reality of nudity, age and gender, contrasts strongly with the slick and evocative spectacularity of commercial cabaret. Such contrast in performance style correlates directly with the double standard and consequent censorship applied to the material in question.

As discussed, the double standard applied to gender, age and performing style emerged through an observation of the experienced censorship. In view of Bunn's critical approach to New Censorship Theory such double standards could be seen as the manifestation of state censorship, through the market which creates the condition for self-censorship. If we consider the 'state censors as actors internal to communication networks' (Bunn 2015) then we can view commercial cabaret operating as 'state censor' specifically through its ability to dictate expectations of what cabaret should be. Through its high production values of nostalgic sexed-up version of satire and criticism of the original cabaret, commercial cabaret prevents satire and criticism of contemporary society from being expressed under the name of cabaret. Precisely for these reasons, commercial cabaret alters the recollection of the real nature of original cabaret. If my practical experience of censorship on the one hand demonstrates my inability to apply self-censorship, on the other it exposes the double standards applied by the state, through the market, on those specific issues addressed by my experimental cabaret.

In conclusion, in contemporary UK, the extreme popularity and dominance of commercial cabaret over the form can be attributed to its commercial success. As a consequence, commercial cabaret retains the ability to control the boundaries of content and style, as well as the definition of cabaret. Through the process of anticipation, commercial cabaret generates financial profit while determining what is and what is not acceptable as cabaret. The double standard, determined by the dominance of commercial cabaret, applied to my material is an example of contemporary state censorship. By creating the condition for self-censorship, the [nominally] abolished state censorship is devolved into the practitioner keeping the same aim of controlling innovation, change and criticism of the establishment. These findings bring some clarification on the reasons contemporary cabaret perception seems to obliterate the correct recollection of the original.

## Notes

1. 1972 film *Cabaret* – directed by Bob Fosse – from a screenplay by Jay Presson Allen, based on the stage musical, also called *Cabaret*, by John Kander, Fred Ebb and Joe Masteroff, which was based on the 1951 play *I Am a Camera* by John Van Druten (based on the 1939 novel *Goodbye to Berlin* by Christopher Isherwood).
2. <https://www.designmynight.com/london/whats-on/cabaret-in-london>.
3. <https://www.headout.com/blog/best-london-cabaret-shows/>.

4. <https://www.theupcoming.co.uk/2019/07/28/ms-paolinis-phantasmagoria-cabaret-at-hoxton-hall-theatre-review/>.
5. <https://thespyinthestalls.com/2019/07/ms-paolini-phantasmagoria-cabaret/>.
6. <https://kinoteka.org.uk/programme/closing-night-gala-top-dog-screening-and-immersive-dinner>

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