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Alston, Adam. 2012. Damocles and the Plucked: Audience Participation and Risk in Half Cut. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22(3), pp. 344-354. ISSN 1048-6801 [Article]

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## **Damocles and the Plucked: Audience Participation and Risk in *Half Cut***

Adam Alston

### **Abstract**

This article looks to identify a political mode of audience engagement in the ‘one-on-one’ performance, *Half Cut*. In response to recent economic turbulence in the UK and abroad, I draw on Hans-Thies Lehmann’s appeal for an ‘aesthetics of risk’ in the theatre: an aesthetics which I suggest might begin at the level of audience reception. This marks a turn away from the more prevalent application of risk to artistic production. Couched in the sociological context of Ulrich Beck’s ‘risk society’, I compare risk-taking in contemporary financial markets with the apparently trivial and seemingly ‘risky’ act of paying to pluck a single hair from another’s body as a participant in *Half Cut*. I consider how affective responses such as embarrassment and awkwardness in one-on-one theatre (which might be felt as ‘risks’) function either as something masochistically consumed within the experience industry, or as positive values subversively premised on loss – such as loss of dignity and self-assuredness – provided that risk is not something passively submitted to, but actively committed to. The argument centres on an economically defined power dynamic operating between performer and participant, paying close attention to how the successful operation of this dynamic within the aesthetic space of *Half Cut* might lift an otherwise fetishised relationship into something felt through affectation. I suggest that a triadic relationship between risk, agency and responsibility – which is perhaps broken in financial markets – is forged through a ‘dialogic intimacy’ between performer and participant, opening space for a radical engagement with risk beginning at the level of an existential queasiness.

### **Damocles and the Plucked: Audience Participation and Risk in *Half Cut***

*A young man in a clean-cut suit beckons me into a two metre by one metre room: to the left, a sink with fragrances and hand creams; to the right, a price list and stick-man diagram illustrating a graded system of plucking, waxing or shaving hair from a model's body. 'Pluck', I say, and hand over the designated pound. Ushered into an adjacent room, I find myself facing another young man, good-looking, with a wide, beaming grin. We are alone. His only clothing is a pair of small black boxer shorts (Emporio Armani). 'Hello', he says. A 'hello' giggles from my throat to my tongue. A set of razors, tweezers and waxing strips are sprawled across a table to my right. Marks on his chest glow red from recent activity. We exchange pleasantries. He seems comfortable, certainly more so than me. I feel the weight of something between us – something like control, but a control that neither of us seems wholly able to seize and that renders us both exposed. He gestures to the table and I turn to pick up the tweezers. Blood prickles against the skin on my forehead and cheeks. I feel invested in responsibility – both for the model and myself. Another giggle. I apologise, and his grin widens. I swallow, approach and pluck. One hair from his left breast.*

Half Cut's *Half Cut* at Theatre Souk in October 2010 was a paradoxical and risky mix of the trivial and the challenging that so often seems to characterise 'one-on-one' theatre. Taking *Half Cut* as a case study, this article explores the political act of committing to risk as a single audience participant in live theatre – even if risk is only *felt* to be risky – and considers how this commitment might encourage reflection on the socio-economic anchors of affective responses such as embarrassment and awkwardness. I will be commenting on the significance of framing theatre as fit for consumption against the context of risk-taking in daily life, particularly in relation to the impact of recent economic turbulence felt across Europe and the United States. How might committing to risk destabilise both a sense of personal security and the perceived rationality of an economically defined power dynamic

operating between performer and audience? My feeling is that the relationships between risk-taking, agency and responsibility in the theatre are much stronger than comparable practices outside of aesthetic space, where responsibility is side-lined in favour of obfuscation or excused by fatalism, and agency is rarely considered an option when the risks seem to be out of personal control or influence. On however small a scale, perhaps committing to risk in ‘one-on-one’ theatre might dampen the tendency to rely on fatalism to relieve the burden of accountability either for our own risk-taking in daily life, or for failing to take action against those whose risk-taking is detrimental to economic, social, and environmental well-being.

The popularity of theatre with an audience of one, what I am here calling ‘one-on-one’ theatre,<sup>1</sup> has rocketed over the past decade – particularly so in the last couple of years – and is now not so much a novelty, as a staple of fringe theatre programming in the United Kingdom, especially in London.<sup>2</sup> The Battersea Arts Centre’s (BAC) most recent *One-on-One Festival* (2011) implemented a provocative marketing strategy. The online ‘brochure’ asked its potential consumers – I hope I use the word advisedly – to ‘Fill up on 3 delicious courses of intimate theatre’.<sup>3</sup> Theatre is here pitched as fit for consumption by framing the

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Zerihan has taken issue with the opposition constructed between actor and spectator in ‘one-on-one’ situations, and instead felt the need to reinstate the proliferation of the term ‘one to one’ which seemed dominant prior to the Battersea Arts Centre’s *One-on-One* festivals. Just as Zerihan allied her terminology to what she was looking for in the work of Adrian Howells (therapy), Oreet Ashery (witnessing) and Franko B (eroticism), so do I ally my focus on risk and confrontation in preferring the term one-on-one. Rachel Zerihan, ‘One to One: A Strange Duet’, *Quorum*, seminar at Queen Mary, University of London (London, 16 March 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Festivals, events and venues regularly programming one-on-one theatre in London which are not discussed in this paper include: *Sprint* at the Camden People’s Theatre; Stoke Newington International Airport’s *Live Art Speed Date*; SHUNT at the SHUNT Vaults in London Bridge (later Bermondsey Street and now without base); and The Institute of Contemporary Art. This brief list is not intended to be comprehensive.

<sup>3</sup> ‘BAC One-on-One Festival: What’s Your Taste?’, Programme, (29 March – 9 April 2011) Battersea Arts Centre. <http://www.bac.org.uk/whats-on/one-on-one-festival/> [accessed 13 April 2011], p. 1.

one-on-one experience as some sort of theatrical nouvelle cuisine: both bite-size and intense. Comparably, Theatre Souk welcomes their audience to its 'market place' in which a reasonable entry fee is charged, and a bartering system for each performance follows from there.<sup>4</sup> This would appear to be a successful co-opting of theatre by the idealism of the neoliberal free-market – a trait which has recently been identified as affecting even the most socially engaged of art practices.<sup>5</sup> Factoring in the possibility of consuming participatory 'risks' for the audience, it seems pertinent to question what is being consumed and how in one-on-one theatre. Consequently, I have split this paper into three sections: the first looks at the commonplace production of risk in contemporary socio-economic space, particularly in the UK; the second addresses an 'aesthetics of risk' in the theatre and why such an aesthetics might be deemed significant and appropriate; the third and last section applies this aesthetics to *Half Cut* to determine how risk is produced in the moment of performance and how this might be understood as transgressive in relation to the production of risk operating outside of aesthetic space.

Ulrich Beck's notion of the 'risk society', a phenomenon that I believe has come to fruition over the past decade, will be borrowed to help eke out how risk is produced in contemporary socio-economic space. Counter to apathetic or fatalistic responses to commonplace risk-taking, I opt for a radical engagement with risk within the potentially subversive site of aesthetic space. Striving to assess one-on-one theatre's production and reception within the risk society, I will draw on Hans-Thies Lehmann's call for an 'aesthetics of risk' and weigh the politics of committing to risk in performance against the ethical compromise of objectifying a stranger to that end. I will pay close attention to the economic transaction hanging over the encounter between the hair plucking participant and potentially

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<sup>4</sup> *Theatre Souk*, Programme, Theatredelicatessen (London, 14 Sept – 16 Oct 2010), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Jen Harvie, 'Democracy and Neoliberalism in Art's Social Turn and Roger Hiorns's Seizure', *Performance Research*, 16.2 (2011), pp. 113-123.

plucked performer in *Half Cut* to assess what is being consumed and how. Gender and sexuality may well influence what is felt to be ‘risky’ (or *risqué*) by a given spectator, and the perception of participatory ‘risks’ will be dependent on the race, sexuality and gender of different spectators. Consequently, I must emphasise the subjectivity of my account of *Half Cut* above. But my focus will be on an economically determined power dynamic which is universal to all participating spectators who go along with the theatrical contract offered to them: to pay money to pluck, wax, or shave a model’s hair. I will consider the weight of this transaction within aesthetic space as a successfully functioning framing device that might unravel an otherwise fetishised relationship between performer and participant. What interests me is how the stimulus of affectation might prompt a deeper reflection on the roles of agency and responsibility within the aesthetically framed risk scenario – a reflection exposing apathy and fatalism as unfavourable alternatives in the wider context of institutional and institutionalised risk-taking.

### The Production of Risk in the Risk Society

There is no consensus on the etymological history of ‘risk’, but sociologists tend to agree on its emergence correlating to the decline of religion in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Pascal’s experiments with probability theory in the 1650s and 1660s were emblematic of a turn in Europe away from

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<sup>6</sup> See Peter L. Bernstein, *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996); Stephen Lyng, ‘Sociology of the Edge: Social Theory and Voluntary Risk Taking’, in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, ed. by Stephen Lyng (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 17-49; Niklas Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory*, trans. Rhodes Barrett (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1993); and Gerda Reith, ‘Living with Risk: Chance, Luck and the Creation of Meaning in Uncertainty’, in *The Aesthetics of Risk: Volume 3 of the SoCCAS Symposia*, ed. by John Welchman (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008), pp. 57-78.

providential determinism towards Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>7</sup> Statistical and logical inference became increasingly significant in the milieu of a European society harbouring a growing interest in economic incentive.<sup>8</sup> It is no accident that the earliest risk assessments came from merchants insuring against maritime disaster shortly after the time of Pascal.<sup>9</sup> Risk was from the outset bound up with insurance against financial loss in a world that no longer laid capital gain in the hands of God. Insurance against risk, as a concept and a practice, was, and still is, bound up with uncertainty about what the future holds.

Today the notion of risk is virtually omnipresent the world over. Sociologist Ulrich Beck earmarked the trajectory of late-twentieth century world history as crashing towards the ‘risk society’, where a kind of ‘reflexive’ problem solving becomes dominant. Techno-economic progress, claims Beck, is implicitly bound up with the production of risks.<sup>10</sup> We might see global warming as a definitive case in point where a socially recognised hazard is produced by means of techno-economic, particularly industrial progress (where progress is

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<sup>7</sup> Whilst Pascal famously formulated a ‘wager’ that belief in God is better than disbelief, the place of God in the research of the probability theorists that followed became increasingly insignificant. What is more, his wager constitutes only a small percentage of his work on probability. Pascal was among the earliest, if not the earliest, experimenter with probability theory. As Ian Hacking acknowledges, the Port Royal *Logic* (1662), of which Pascal was a contributor, ‘was the first to mention numerical measurements of something actually called “probability”’. See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: a Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Hacking, *Probability*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> François Ewald claims that ‘Risk is a neologism of insurance, said to derive from the Italian word *risco* which meant “that which cuts”, hence “reef” and consequently “risk to cargo on the high seas”’. See François Ewald, ‘Insurance and Risk’, in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), pp. 197-210 (p. 198).

<sup>10</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. by Mark Ritter (Los Angeles: Sage, 1992), p.13.

here defined by industry).<sup>11</sup> What industrial modernity procured in terms of economic and social progress also produced a series of risks, manifested particularly well in this example, which threatens not only progress, but the livelihoods of those who may or may not benefit from such risk production. Beck argues that modernity has consequently developed (although we might read this as an on-going process once modernity is read as a multiple phenomenon) from its industrial phase into a phase of ‘reflexivity’, or ‘reflexive modernity’, which looks to manage risk production.

It is not necessary to dwell on this transition when it is already accounted for so succinctly in Beck’s writing. I prefer instead to focus on the notion of a ‘risk society’ in excess of a primarily ecological concern mapped by Beck. Terrorist attacks, the menace of malicious computer viruses for national security, misplaced laptops holding the data of countless citizens and identity theft, are just a few examples which produce a commonplace and toxic brew of paranoia, scaremongering and potential catastrophe that threatens to shatter the optimist’s rose-tinted spectacles. My tone here might well be labelled by Anthony Giddens, another key sociologist on the theme of risk production, as cynical pessimism.<sup>12</sup> I would consider apathy a far graver criticism: worse still, ‘A sense of “fate” which ‘relieves the individual of the burden of engagement with an existential situation which might otherwise be chronically disturbing’.<sup>13</sup>

It seems to me that the ‘chronically disturbing’ alternative to fatalism referred to by Giddens, an alternative that we might re-phrase as an existential queasiness to underline the

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<sup>11</sup> This is a global risk, a kind which particularly interests Beck, which we might set apart from risks relating to specific countries or locations (one part of the world might be at risk from famine while another is at risk from heart-related illnesses relating to obesity – both of which we might attribute to the distribution of wealth and resolutions, or lack thereof, to re-define relationships to this distribution on a developing global stage).

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

visceral component of engaging with this state, is at least partly explained by the implicit relation of risk, as something commonplace, to uncertainty. Nassim Nicholas Taleb's notion of a 'Black Swan' proves informative here. Taleb describes a 'Black Swan' as an event which is an *outlier* ('outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility'), 'carries extreme impact', and is explained only *after* its occurrence, much like the discovery of black swans in Australia and the consequent re-writing of ornithological text books for those in the Old World.<sup>14</sup> So there would seem to be two broad categories of risk today: those which are future-oriented predictions of possible negative occurrences, and those which are, like the menacing Black Swan, entirely unpredictable.

Positioning this contextual material in relation to *Half Cut* in particular, and aesthetic space generally, it seems pertinent to underline two distinct factors that seem to be having a profound impact on the nurture of the risk society, and the climate in which theatre is produced and received in the UK today. My focus will henceforth be narrowed to the production of economically determined risk scenarios. *Half Cut* was performed in the aftermath of transition from a Labour government to the current UK Coalition of Liberal and Conservative parties. Accompanying this transition were (and still are) attempts to diminish both the size of the national budget deficit<sup>15</sup> and pull of the economic crisis which peaked in 2008. It is important not to confuse the two in what follows, but it is also worth stressing that

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<sup>14</sup> Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: the Impact of the Highly Improbable* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>15</sup> According to the Office of National Statistics, net debt, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, has risen steadily from around 30% between 2001-2 to 58.0% at the end of February 2011. This figure rose particularly between 2008-10. See Office for National Statistics, *Public Sector Finances*, Great Britain (22 March 2011) <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=206> [accessed 5 April 2011].

perception of one might influence perception of the other. The current cuts to Arts Council funding in the UK<sup>16</sup> are encouraging arts organisations, theatres and theatre companies to strike a balance between the raising of ticket prices, encouragement of patronage, particularly through gift aid, and corporate advertising or product placement.<sup>17</sup> The extent to which UK theatres, and arts venues in general, can be said to provide alternative spaces to zones of consumption otherwise proliferate outside of aesthetic space is diminishing. In some respects, the branding of the recent BAC *One-on-One* festival and Theatre Souk discussed earlier is a reflection of this.

The production, distribution and consumption of goods was not necessarily behind the collapse of the global market place, but, to the author's mind at least, the distribution and redistribution of production and consumption's fuel: namely, money in the form of circulating loans.<sup>18</sup> That the majority of UK citizens have such minimal control over the

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<sup>16</sup> 'In passing on overall government cuts of 15%' to Arts Council England (ACE), regularly funded arts organisations fell foul of significant (and sometimes complete) cuts to their funding: 'Of the 1,330 organisations that had applied for funding for 2012-15, 638 were disappointed. Of those, 206 had been regularly funded by ACE'. See Mark Brown and Charlotte Higgins, 'Arts Council Funding: A Day of Mixed Fortunes as Cuts are Announced', *Guardian Online*, 30 Mar 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/mar/30/arts-council-funding-cuts> [accessed 5 April 2011].

<sup>17</sup> A good example of this latter was the integration and branding of Courvoisier cognac in the gastronomic performances on offer at *Coming Up* festival (2010) at London Bridge's Debut theatre.

<sup>18</sup> Collateralized Debt Obligations (CDOs) are bundles of loans which are bought and sold on the financial market. My understanding of the premise is that good loans are bundled together with so-called 'toxic loans' – not necessarily by intention (an important disclaimer if I am to deter from potential libel). To buy and sell CDOs is to buy and sell risk. The commodification of risk is not peculiar to the twenty-first century. Derivatives, another example of risk being bought and sold, have been exchanged for nearly three hundred years. What set CDOs apart from their precursors was their complexity. Traders were not always aware just what they were

actions of those involved in circulating these loans is significant. This raises the question of agency over the risk scenarios generated by such transactions, in particular how we intend to position ourselves in relation to those risk scenarios. I rejected above the validity of fatalism or apathy as suitable responses. I wish to propose that the attributes of responsibility and vulnerability accompanying the choice to commit to a risk scenario in one-on-one theatre might provide a radical alternative for engaging with risk – particularly the risks associated with economic activity. Whilst it would be difficult to justify *Half Cut* as directly responding to the economic crisis or national budget cuts, our ‘horizon of expectations’, both cultural and ideological, is ‘bound to interact with every aspect of the theatrical event’.<sup>19</sup> I want to emphasise the impact of this backdrop on the interchanges which might take place between performer(s) and participating audience in one-on-one performance today, but in such a way that a relational understanding of that interchange might be enriched. In addition to future-oriented predictions of possible negative occurrences and ‘Black Swan’ scenarios, there might be a third kind of risk opened up through artistic practice, particularly in one-on-one theatre.<sup>20</sup> This is a kind of risk that makes little sense when phrased in terms of potential gain, because loss is pitched as a positive attribute – loss of self-esteem, loss of dignity, and loss of self-assuredness. Loss is referred to here as a politically effective tool in the risk society, if what is lost is lost as a product of choice. This might be considered as a ‘radical’ engagement with risk as it sets about subverting the roots of the concept. This is risk at odds with Enlightenment rationalism and the act of insuring against loss; loss might be approached

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buying and selling. It was the degree of uncertainty regarding the risks being circulated that stoked market volatility.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 99.

<sup>20</sup> This does not relate to artistic practice alone, but might also refer to fetish clubs, S&M, drug taking and a host of other practices described by Stephen Lyng (after Hunter S. Thompson) as ‘Edgework’. See Lyng, *Edge*.

profitably as the very thing to be invested in. A pragmatically radical engagement with risk seems more important now than ever before: ‘although we are beset by major problems, we can and should mobilise either to reduce their impact or to transcend them’.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps a good place to start would be to prompt an existential questioning of the influence and allure of risk on a personal level. It is perhaps for this reason that I find it so important to encourage risk-taking for audiences today, so that risk is not something passively submitted to, but actively committed to. Unsettling audiences in such a way that they *choose* to risk being unsettled might draw attention either to a lack of choice within the risk society, nurturing a desire to change the circumstances which promote this lack, or highlight a reluctance to act when acting is an option, so that reluctance morphs into a sense of responsibility for one’s own part within a risk scenario. Instilling a political awareness of our capacity to manipulate circumstances, grounded in a sense of personal responsibility for our actions, consequently presents itself as an admirable motivation for participating in one-on-one theatre in the twenty-first century.

### The Aesthetics of Risk

It is worth clarifying the difference between risk, and the perception of risk, within aesthetic space.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the potential-plucker in *Half Cut*, the risks involved in participation

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<sup>21</sup> Giddens, *Consequences*, p. 137.

<sup>22</sup> I am aware of Jane Blocker’s claim that risk is ‘aestheticised’ in daily life, particularly in war time: ‘In the US today, the advent of reality television shows such as *Fear Factor*, the globalization of the economy, the diffuse and endless “war on terror”, and the exploding national debt, have precipitated a routine aestheticization of risk that engenders confusion about who is undertaking it and how its responsibilities are transferred to others’. See Jane Blocker, ‘Aestheticizing Risk in War Time: The SLA to Iraq’, in *The Aesthetics of Risk: Volume 3 of the SoCCAS Symposia*, ed. by John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008), pp. 191-223 (p. 210). As I hope to

might be described as the uncertain affective response, or set of responses – awkwardness, embarrassment, discomfort, etc. – to the aesthetic stimulus of plucking a man’s hair with a pair of tweezers. While this kind of risk seems trivial in relation to those of Beck’s risk society, perception of those risks on the part of the plucker might be significant. The risk of pain for the potentially-plucked cannot really be called a ‘risk’, as the potentially-plucked has been plucked before, and is well aware of the level of pain forthcoming. Risk ceases to be risk when divorced from uncertainty. As Gerda Reith writes, risk ‘is defined by and through temporality: the notion of “risk” expresses not something that *has* happened or *is* happening, but something that *might* happen’.<sup>23</sup> As a future-oriented phenomenon of uncertainty, sometimes related to, but distinct from harm, the experience of risk in the live theatre event will usually be much stronger for the spectator than the artist, particularly when a given performance is repeated for different spectators.<sup>24</sup>

A point of departure to begin unpacking this is taken from Hans-Thies Lehmann’s conclusion to *Postdramatic Theatre*: ‘In the age of rationalization, of the ideal of calculation

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explain, the aesthetic space of the live theatre event and the co-presence of participating parties lends itself to remedying any such confusion.

<sup>23</sup> Reith, *Risk*, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> This accounts for my surprise in response to the dominating application of risk as a discourse to the physical or psychological pain of the artist, especially the live artist. See Claire MacDonald, ed., ‘On Risk’, spec. issue of *Performance Research*, 1.2 (Summer 1996); and Welchman’s *The Aesthetics of Risk*. There may well be unanticipated (emotional) responses generated in the unique encounter with different participants, but the extent to which these responses might be anticipated will be much stronger for a participating audience than the artist. In considering risks for the artist, it makes more sense to me to consider exceptions to this rule. These include the employment of chance as a creative device (such as John Cage and others at the Black Mountain College in the 1950s), the risks of artistic failure, and committing to scenarios with multiple uncertain trajectories (such as the pointing of a loaded gun to the head of Marina Abramović in *Rhythm 0*).

and of the generalized rationality of the market, it falls to the theatre to deal with extremes of affect by means of an *aesthetics of risk*, extremes which always also contain the possibility of offending by breaking taboos'.<sup>25</sup> I drew attention to the emergence of risk as a concept being bound up with handling uncertainty as a rationalistic endeavour, and yet Lehmann seems to argue for an 'aesthetics of risk' as being resistant to rationality: particularly the rationality propagated by the market. It seems anachronistic to pitch an aesthetics of risk against the system of probabilistic prediction from which risk springs. However, it also seems fair to downplay the onus on probability previously discussed in assessing the evolution of risk as a concept. Firstly, elucidating the work of Daniel Bernoulli in the early eighteenth century, Peter Bernstein explains how the mathematician converted 'the process of calculating probabilities into a procedure for introducing subjective considerations into decisions that have uncertain outcomes'.<sup>26</sup> Feeling is consequently introduced into the equation. Secondly, two centuries on in a post-World War world, 'Mathematicians and philosophers had to admit that reality encompassed entire sets of circumstances that people had never contemplated before'.<sup>27</sup> The Black Swan rears its head as risk's flip side to rationalism. Today, the normalcy of risk-taking within the risk society might encourage less focus on the probability of something happening, and more on the level of threat anticipated. The rational application of statistics might be less significant to a contemporary audience than the allure of flirting with threat: a commitment to risky situations that verge on the masochistic in courting personal insecurity. Perhaps willingly submitting to the allure of risk as a potentially stimulating site of pleasurable degradation<sup>28</sup> is little more than another example of what

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<sup>25</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 187.

<sup>26</sup> Bernstein, *Gods*, p. 105.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>28</sup> Foucault's notion of 'limit experience' and Lyng's commentary on 'edgework' are both informative here. Such risk-taking activity might be transgressive (in the case of Foucault) or confrontational (in the case of Lyng)

Wouter Hillaert describes as the ‘experience industry’: a profit-making enterprise spawned from strip-clubs, role-play adventures and theme parks.<sup>29</sup> As I hope to show with my Damocles metaphor below, the mechanics of the relationship between finance and consumption in an aesthetically framed exchange will prove vital in defending one-on-one theatre against this consideration.

Lehmann describes ‘taboo’ as ‘a socially anchored form of affective reaction that rejects (“abjects”) certain realities, forms of behaviour or images as “untouchable”, disgusting or unacceptable prior to any rational judgment’.<sup>30</sup> This resonates with my own encounter of *Half Cut*, albeit with slightly less intensity. The plucking of a single hair, as an act of objectification, proved unpalatable on an ethical level. Emmanuel Levinas describes how ‘The Other not only comes to us from a context but signifies by itself’.<sup>31</sup> Levinas’s phenomenology would seem a rich resource to utilise in unpacking an ethics of the face-to-face in *Half Cut*, particularly in relation to the kind of affective reaction, prior to rational judgment, described by Lehmann – not least for the onus placed on the responsibility housed in this ‘first discourse’ of the ‘face’ which signifies and appeals by itself, set apart from the influence of other sign systems. Levinas defines subjectivity as ‘a responsibility for others’ to which one is compelled, for responsibility is an implicit part of our relationship to the Other: a relationship which reaches deeply within the constitution of self and the nurture of self-

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as a negotiation of structurally developed normative boundaries between licit and illicit acts in a given society. See Lyng, *Edge*, pp. 40-47. There is both pleasure and a sense of agency to be found in risky thrill seeking – whether courting sexual taboo or skydiving – which might subvert security akin to Lehmann’s comments on challenging socially anchored affective responses.

<sup>29</sup> Wouter Hillaert, ‘(Long) Live the Experience: Reflections on Performance, Pleasure and Perversion’, trans. by Lisa Wiegel, Lise Uytterhoeven and Peter M. Boenisch, in ‘Border Collisions: Contemporary Flemish Theatre’, spec. issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, ed. by Lourdes Orozco and Peter M. Boenisch, 20.4 (2010), pp. 432-36 (p. 434).

<sup>30</sup> Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 184.

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 31.

expression.<sup>32</sup> I recognise and support the significance of this primary appeal (an appeal usefully explored and developed in relation to theatre by Helena Grehan),<sup>33</sup> but in defining the locus of affect and responsibility in the particular instance of *Half Cut*, particularly with regard to comparative risk scenarios inducing affect outside of aesthetic space, I wish to widen critical scope away from the singularity of the face towards the very structuring schemas Levinas sought to pierce through. I wish to assess how one can be held accountable for choice beyond such an implicit bond, by making explicit how the exercise of choosing – a product of agency – relates to responsibility within an economically defined exchange between performer and participant.

Affect theorists are keen to underline the relational qualities of affect as something existing in-between subjects and subjects, or subjects and objects, without ever being fully subsumed within them.<sup>34</sup> The apparent ephemerality and ineffability of affect, which may be a product of this relationality, is perhaps less significant than the visceral residues left behind and it is these residues that I hope to suggest might prompt conscious reflection on the significances attributed to a given affect by a participant.<sup>35</sup> To fail to pluck the model's hair in *Half Cut* would prove unpalatable on a socio-political level just as much as the ethical level of objectifying an Other: I would remain tied to taboo, in Lehmann's sense of the term, unable to transgress a social boundary between two consenting human beings. I am pitching in tension an ethical responsibility for the Other against an egocentric, socio-political transgression of the social anchors of affective response in excess of Levinasian

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 66-67.

<sup>33</sup> Helena Grehan, *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 'An Inventory of Shimmers', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp.1-25 (p.1).

<sup>35</sup> See Megan Watkins, 'Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect', in *The Affect Theory Reader*, pp. 269-285 (p. 269).

responsibility. Risk-taking in quotidian space, which might include rendering oneself vulnerable to negative affect, might similarly objectify Others towards a given end (for instance, profiteering), but the transgression of socio-political boundaries are less clear when risk-taking is approached with complacency. In what follows, I will be testing how the relationships between risk, agency and responsibility might differ between aesthetic and quotidian spaces.

### The Production of Risk in *Half Cut*

There is a sense of responsibility in any performance, particularly participatory performance, to play by the rules of an often unspoken contract between artist and audience. If a creative offer is made, it is the participant's part to see where the acceptance (or denial) of that offer takes them. In *Half Cut*, this offer is brokered by the actor in his clean-cut suit – perhaps we might call him the 'pluck pimp'. Both model and 'pluck pimp' are male. The scenario is inherently phallogentric, particularly so when the 'pluck pimp' lays claim to ownership over the model, referring to him as 'his own' when brokering the deal. He is master over the spectator also. He sets the price and the spectator must choose to accept or decline the offer. It is the 'pluck pimp' who seems to benefit from the exploitation of both model and participant. The spectator might be craving an intimate encounter, or any other motive for agreeing to participate, but such ends are premised on positioning the model as object the moment money passes from the pocket of the participant to the hand of the 'pluck pimp'. Gender and sexuality might underlie the risk scenario, but the political implications of both inputs, which will impinge on what is experienced as risky or compromised, are determined by a socio-economic relation. It is this determination of risk and its implications that pull focus in what follows.

The financial transaction seems to hang over the relationship like the Sword of Damocles. Much like the myth, the broker (Dionysius) is in a position of power over the model (the glorious court of Dionysius). Curiosity prompts the participant (Damocles) to have in on the action. The Sword – here represented as a sum of money – hangs by a thread (a horse's hair) above the participant's head throughout the exchange with the model. The promise of an engaging theatrical event is tarnished by the precarious threat of the Sword which binds potential plucker and model together. The omnipresent threat of the sword sparks in Damocles the realisation of the fearful conditions embedded within the promise of magnificence whilst on Dionysius's throne. Ashamed, Damocles learns the error of his ways.

Perhaps the Sword of Damocles marks a fitting metaphor for the embarrassing weight of a financial transaction fostering the objectification of another human being. Where gratification might be said to accompany the objectification of a prostitute, I am doubtful that embarrassment plays an important role in the moment of the sexual act. Embarrassment appears anomalous to this comparable form of objectification. But it is not this anomaly that distinguishes the two forms of objectification, but the modes of appearance and invisibility that relate to the presence of the financial transaction. I am not suggesting that embarrassment is an inevitable consequence of the risk scenario in *Half Cut*: embarrassment was induced in me, but it need not be induced in others of different race, class, gender and sexuality. From the outset, the relationship between finance and objectification dominated. It is this relationship that I am pitching as a constant amidst the variables of identity. Where the variables of identity impact on and possibly define what is perceived to be risky, the productive source of risk remains the same. And this source is rendered omnipresent within an aesthetic space which attunes attention towards recognition of an otherwise fetishised relation between the consumer of risk – the theatrical thrill seeker, perhaps in search of embarrassment as both 'thrill' and 'risk' – and the objectified model through which the

consumption of risk is made possible. Even if sought by intention, affect is produced by a visceral sense of accountability for the production of risk (blood prickling behind reddened cheeks): a production within which both performer and participant are caught. This one-on-one scenario has spawned what one might misleadingly call a mode of ‘visibility’ in the theatre – but, of course, this is not something seen, but felt. This is more than a one-on-one encounter as there is an invisible third party in the room. This third party is not the pluck pimp, for he is next door. It is the sword held by a horse’s hair: the third point in a relational configuration represented by a financial transaction and rendered present through affectation.

To borrow from Nicholas Ridout, the fetishised<sup>36</sup> relationship between actor and paying spectator is revealed as a difficult one: ‘I have paid to have this man look at me, and he is paid to look. Our intimacy is always alienated’.<sup>37</sup> What seems to be at stake in the face-to-face is recognition of the human relationship otherwise obfuscated through the act of exchanging money. The wheel could be seen to return full-circle back to Levinas at this point, but my analytical interest remains elsewhere. Ridout describes theatre as ‘a machine that sets out to undo itself. It conceives itself as an apparatus for the production of affect by means of representation, in the expectation that the most powerful affects will be obtained at precisely those moments when the machinery appears to break down’.<sup>38</sup> In *Half Cut*, however, this economic relationship between producing actor and consuming audience is not

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<sup>36</sup> To crudely simplify Karl Marx, a fetishised relationship is mysterious, ‘because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour’. See Karl Marx, *Capital: an Abridged Edition*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 80.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

glimpsed through the failure of theatre to fully represent something, but through successfully representing and rerouting the objectification of the model from the box office at the door to Theatre Souk, to the secondary box office of the pluck pimp. This latter is situated firmly within the aesthetic space of the performance in such a way that there is not, as Jane Blocker has claimed, a confusion of responsibilities within aesthetic space.<sup>39</sup> Rather, an economic exchange takes place both outside of, and within aesthetic space – but in the latter, the relationship between money and theatrical commodity is rendered direct.

Whilst I acknowledge that content is not easily divorced from the form through which it appears, I would argue that it is equally important not to undermine the significant sway theatre form holds over the reception of that content.<sup>40</sup> The one-on-one theatre form offers absolute centrality to what I would describe as a dialogic intimacy: an intimacy forged between two individuals where both have the capacity to radically influence the creative stimulus, as opposed to a reading of that stimulus alone. This is an intimacy that recognises, with Grant Kester, the danger of overlooking ‘the manifest differentials in power relations’ between participating subjects in artistic practice.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, a possible hub determining the distribution of power in a given theatrical relation is pitched as being in excess of all participating parties; an abstract relation which is important to bring into focus. One means of doing this is to utilise the visceral consequences of committing to risk as a vehicle for recognising complicity and responsibility. This is not to detract from the agency afforded to ‘embodied’ spectators of theatre events experienced collectively in promenade

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<sup>39</sup> Blocker, *War Time*, p. 210.

<sup>40</sup> See Rachel Zerihan’s interview with Adrian Howells for comments on form and content. Rachel Zerihan, et al., *Live Art Development Agency Study Room Guide on One to One Performance* ([London]: Live Art Development Agency, 2009), p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 182.

theatre or from within the protective bunker of the darkened theatre auditorium. But in one-on-one theatre, a much simpler exchange takes place when the scenario is paired down to two. Both artist and participant might be open to manipulation, but the onus on personal responsibility for the artwork is heightened in the one-on-one scenario in which there is rarely an option of recourse to the (frequently, but not always) safe zone of a community of strangers or darkened auditorium. With one-on-one theatre comes exposure, and with exposure comes a degree of vulnerability. In the case of *Half Cut*, the economic relation between artist and paying participant is a difficult one – the Sword of Damocles omnipresent – which renders complicity in commodification overbearing. The paying participant is forced to face the uncompromising situation of having rendered him or herself complicit in the nurture of a mutual vulnerability.

The implications of being subject to such a risk in the theatre seem to resonate against the milieu of the risk society. In such a milieu, agency might be side-lined for fatalism if one feels that the magnitude of a given risk scenario is too great to be influenced personally. Global warming is a pressing example. Responsibility for risks gone bad might either be obfuscated, or passed on to others who had no role in the taking of those risks. An example here would be the circulation of toxic loans. In contrast, the paradoxical and risky mix of the trivial and the challenging in *Half Cut* – a mix which I claimed was typical of one-on-one theatre generally – renders the triadic relationship between risk, agency and responsibility uncomfortably strong. The decision to accept the offer of plucking a single hair encourages a sense of responsibility once the creative trajectory of the risk scenario is negotiated. The affective responses produced by the risk scenario function more as a medium to draw out the Damoclesean stimulus for affectation. What emerges as significant is a sense of *accountability*. Committing to risk renders the triad ‘risk-agency-responsibility’ complete and holds the participant to account in their negotiation of the risk scenario. In this sense,

committing to risk scenarios in one-on-one theatre produces pockets of resistance that expose the breaks in agency and responsibility operating elsewhere in the risk society. The political ramifications of the seemingly trivial – the plucking of a single hair – seems to raise the stakes of a politics of engagement in one-on-one theatre and an aesthetics of risk forged through theatre form. One instance of a pragmatically radical engagement with risk might begin on the personal level of committing to an existential queasiness in one-on-one theatre.