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# 'Our strength comes from our connection to each other': a conversation about resilience with Duckie employees Simon Casson, Dicky Eton and Emmy Minton

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## ABSTRACT

Since 1994, the London-based queer performance collective Duckie has produced thousands of events, from its regular Saturday club night to larger-scale immersive themed productions and, more recently, long-running projects working with specific underserved groups. In this edited interview, Duckie's three full-time employees, Simon Casson, Dicky Eton and Emmy Minton, discuss various forms of resilience underpinning the collective's enduring success. These include its relationship with its audiences, its development of robust but adaptable 'holding forms', its willingness to explore new modes and sensibilities, its critical navigation of neoliberal structures, its embrace of uncertainty and failure, and its insistence on collective care.

## KEYWORDS

Duckie; resilience; queer; performance; hope

## Introduction

Since the financial crisis of 2008, increasing political and critical attention has been paid to resilience, understood as the capacity to survive and adjust to sudden or unexpected change. Such responses have often taken market-friendly terms for granted. Reports commissioned by Arts Council England exemplify this. Applying ideas of systems resilience from the field of ecology to arts contexts, Mark Robinson mobilised the language of individual agency, competition, diversified revenue streams, 'products or services and resources' (2010, 18). Sophia Woodley, Patrick Towell, Richard Turpin, Sarah Thelwall and Philippe Schneider considered multiple aspects of resilience rhetorics but remained primarily engaged with economic imperatives, considering some arts workers' prioritisation of aesthetic or audience-related goals over profit 'cause for concern' (2018, 36). Academic research, meanwhile, has emphasised the structural grip of neoliberal terms and conditions. Surveying the situation in Northern Ireland, Matt Jennings, Martin Beirne and Stephanie Knight noted that while the sector has a widely acknowledged history of successful community engagement, arts work remains underfunded, underpaid, insecure and piecemeal, 'with little long-term legacy' (2016/17, 18) or sustained collectivity. Jack Newsinger and Paula Serafini dismissed resilience as 'a solution to the problem of austerity that supports austerity itself' (2019, 2), with those in the sector using implicit

understandings, derived from Romanticism, of the artist as precarious, isolated outsider to accommodate themselves to the iniquities of government cuts.

There is, for now, no getting away from the materialist contingencies of austerity. But some responses, I suggest, are less amenable to neoliberal modes and values than others. Critical discussion of resilience in arts contexts has largely been framed by understandings of arts work as a matter of atomised individuals or hierarchical organisations engaged in the generation of potentially commodifiable cultural products. But what might resilience look like for a mutually supportive collective that understands arts practice as a matter of civically progressive process?

In 1995, producer Simon Casson (aka Simon Strange), host Amy Lamé, DJs the London Readers Wives [*sic*] and 'door whores' Jay Cloth and Father Cloth started a club called Duckie. It ran (and, until the coronavirus pandemic, was still running) on Saturday nights at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern in south London, combining short experimental performance with eclectic pop and rock music, boozy fun with sardonic queer criticality. Duckie also produced larger-scale immersive performance events, including the long-running, tongue-in-cheek *Gay Shame* cycle (held on the evening of London's Pride event) and a format, originating in 2002 as *Ç'est Vauxhall!*, in which punters selected turns from a menu that were performed at their tables. This format, described by Casson as 'performance art as lap dancing', won an Olivier award and successfully toured internationally, and was the first of several Duckie productions at prominent venues including the Barbican and Southbank centres.

In 2011, Duckie became an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. Its three full-time employees are Casson, fellow producer Dicky Eton and fundraiser Emmy Minton. Since then, while continuing to produce queer nightlife events, the organisation has developed multiple projects engaging specific groups and communities. These include The Slaughterhouse Club, a drop-in arts project for people living with homelessness, addiction and mental health challenges (2013–); Duckie Family, a series of events by and for people of colour (2016–); The Palace of Varieties, a series of weekly parties for people with dementia (2016); and a series of 'vintage clubbing' events animating London's hidden queer past (2010–). Between 2014 and 2018, my doctoral research enabled me to be a participant observer in various Duckie projects, which I came to think of as 'homemade mutant hope machines': emergent, autonomous and adaptive structures capable of routinely generating hope in the possibility of better worlds, and beginning, slowly but really, to materialise them (see Walters 2020). Two are particularly relevant to discussions of resilience: The Posh Club and Duckie's cycle of summer-school projects.

In 2012, Duckie launched an afternoon tea-dance and cabaret event for older people without many friends or family; renamed The Posh Club, by early 2020 it was operating regular 10-week runs at 5 locations around southern England. At the Club, staff and guests dress up in celebratory style and the setting is elegant and luxurious. Performances are sometimes risqué and some guests take to the stage themselves. This naughty-but-nice format endows guests with high status within a low-stakes environment, supporting new kinds of confidence, understanding and relationality and enabling fun and fabulous experiments in dressing up, dancing and performance (see Walters 2021). Meanwhile, since 2013, Duckie has run a series of vocational workshop programmes for young LGBTQ+ performers, including the Duckie Homosexualist Summer School or DHSS

(2015–2016) and QTIBPOC Creatives (2017–), the last specifically engaging queer, trans, intersex, Black and people of colour. These schemes offer artistic and vocational training relevant to emerging queer performers that is unavailable elsewhere, from the development of short-form work to advice on bureaucratic administration. But they also offer access to a queer life world, a chosen family circuit of belonging, lineage, guidance, material support and reciprocal intergenerational exchange. They open up queer performance not only as a career but as a fortifying and enriching way of life.

I met Casson, Eton and Minton at Duckie's offices in south London on 17 December 2019, before we had heard of the novel coronavirus but five days after Boris Johnson's rightwing Conservative Party won a decisive victory in the UK general election. It was a sobering backdrop for a conversation filled with laughter and apprehension, touching on various aspects of resilience as they have played out across Duckie's practice. This practice connects dozens of projects, hundreds of performers and volunteers and thousands of 'punters', to use the collective's preferred term, encompassing longitudinal strategies of organisational sustainability, tactics of project development and methods of cultivating partners, participants and practices. Duckie deftly and critically navigates prevailing conditions, perhaps supporting individual resilience on dominant structural terms but also cultivating new forms of resilience predicated on empathy, care and collective support. 'It's something to be a part of', in Minton's words.

The Duckie team have a profound sense of the lived politics of resilience in ways that are not, I suggest, amenable to neoliberal imperatives. This interview unpacks their thinking on aspects of Duckie's work including its organisational longevity, attention to the wants and needs of specific groups and its balancing of listening and leading, as well as its turn from prioritising theatrical runs to cultivating community projects through robust but adaptable longitudinal and collaborative 'holding forms'. They discuss tactics for navigating structures of competition and othering while trying to enable collective care and attend to questions of diversity, representation and accountability within Duckie's practice. The pandemic necessitated the suspension of all Duckie projects. At the time of writing, in June 2020, the collective is drawing up new plans. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

## Interview

### **Ben Walters: Why is Duckie still going after quarter of a century?**

**Simon Casson (SC):** Well, we've moved with the times, you know.

**Dicky Eton (DE):** We don't all drink as much as we used to.

**SC:** We used to have fun and now we just help people.

**DE:** I think it's also to do with the fact that on Saturday nights the same six people are doing that club. The basic team of Duckie has not changed, really, over that period of time. That shows resilience and that shows you care about what you're doing and why you're doing it. And I think that's a really important asset for Duckie.

**SC:** It also shows that you don't have any better offers.

[All laugh.]

**DE:** Speak for yourself!

[All laugh.]

**Emmy Minton (EM):** When I write about Duckie's clubs, I often write about them as audience-specific clubs. They're made for a specific group of people that we know. You know punters on Saturday night and we know the Posh Clubbers and Slaughterhouse Club people. So if you know people and you're making clubs for them – and you're listening to them, which I think we do really well – why would they not come? We're meeting their needs and providing, you know, a lot of fun and stuff.

**SC:** That and we're cheap. We're also cheap.

**EM:** Yep.

**SC:** And practical. I think it's important. They'll probably give me a funny look now but I think it's important not to have a big ego.

[All laugh.]

**EM:** Yeah, funny looks coming.

**SC:** I think it's about the right balance between listening and leadership. Don't be completely punter-led. You have to have a bit of a drive, you know what I mean?

**BW: What kinds of leadership are you thinking of? What kinds of listening?**

**DE:** In terms of leadership, we decided quite clearly after we did the last big *Gay Shame* in 2009 that we couldn't use all of our money from the Arts Council to just do one big gig a year. It was around the same time various different people got cut from the Arts Council and we made a very clear decision to use our money in a more effective way so that we weren't just celebrating one night of queerness, we were doing more for the punters who were around and the world that we were part of, I think.

**EM:** The Posh Club is a good one in the sense that the leadership comes from Dicky and Simon making this really strong holding form that works that is a bit non-negotiable. It's like, 'This is how it works'. The architecture is mirrored across all the clubs because it works. But once you put that in place, all the different locations can make it their own. Go for your life, you know? They've got a flavour that completely reflects the specificity of the local community, so it's finding the balance – this is where you need us to lead and be completely uncompromising around safety and structure and creativity and what works and what doesn't.

**SC:** Architecture's a really good word. We put the intangible architecture in place and fill it up with the participants and the artists and the audience and the volunteers and whatnot. But you have to let people off the leash, that's the thing. Guide them, encourage them, support them, but let them own it so you bring out the best in them rather than being Billy Big-Bollocks, thinking you own it. It's much better that you encourage your collaborators to own it because then they'll do a much better job than if you own it and you go around checking that they've done it properly all the time in some kind of hierarchical system.

**DE:** And that architecture has been in place since day one, 24 years ago.

**SC:** We're still obsessed by inventing popular holding forms that nail it a bit. We're doing that this year with new ones like Queer History Club [a series of informal variety nights related to the 'vintage' events] or Family Dinner [serving queer, trans and intersex people of colour]. But yeah, we love a holding form. You know, like *The Generation Game* or *Strike It Lucky*. Sorry, my references are the ones of an old man.

**BW: Looking back, have there been moments of decisive change for Duckie as an organisation?**

**SC:** Duckie's a game of two halves. I got sober half a lifetime ago in 2005 and then we took Emmy on and we just became more in service of other people rather than in service of ourselves. So we've just gone totally community and completely not West End Wendies. My boyfriend moans at me because we used to go to Sydney, we went to New York, we were an exciting theatre company in the Noughties and all that and we're not that any more. Now we go to Crawley. And you know what? I'm really fucking happy about that.

**EM:** Well, you might be.

[All laugh.]

**DE:** In my head, it's *Ç'est Vauxhall!* that changed Duckie's dynamic and how people see and perceive what we do. That possibly gave us the opportunity to change in the future and generate new ideas and generate new clubs. And it was seen in a new light by people as well who had never heard of Duckie before that.

**SC:** That's a good example of collaborative devising, for want of a less boring name. Coming up with a holding form that's not just serving one person's ego or charisma. We've got no charisma whatsoever between the three of us so we're quite desperate to collaborate with each other. We avoid the politics of ego – he says, dominating the conversation.

**BW: *Ç'est Vauxhall!* brought you a lot of visibility and cultural capital and you toured it extensively. But you didn't choose to extend it or franchise it or use that holding form again.**

**DE:** It never made any fucking money so we were never able to. We were overtaken by those companies like La Clique and La Soirée who got it together. People said we should get into that model and we went, 'No, we don't want to'. It didn't interest us.

**SC:** We wanted to find someone like Emmy and then we wanted to help the world. Rather than be successful. It's a cliché but I was just looking for meaning and all of that. I think we worked it out, while we still had some puff in us, that actually the answer isn't just to amass money and be successful or even be ambitious. The answer is something else, which is more delicate.

**EM:** It's much more about relationships. Things that give you a real sense of the value of being in the moment and really enjoying the making for what it is rather than what other people are going to see from it.

**SC:** It's quite hard to help people. We've tried to find a model whereby we can combine earning money with our sense of fun and our sense of – 'social justice' is such an awful word. Something else, whatever it is.

**EM:** It's keeping the work political, isn't it, and still really enjoying that? Working in a grass-roots community way without it becoming really dull.

**BW:** **This shift in Duckie's sensibility and emphasis happened around the time of the financial crash and the beginning of austerity. Do you think they're linked?**

**SC:** We're always part of the zeitgeist, you know. In the Nineties, we were queer and Britpop, in the Noughties, we were riding the zeitgeist of burlesque and the new cabaret and in the 2010s, when everyone's skint, we're back to the church hall and the hostel and the kitchen table. I guess we are a product of the time. Interestingly, the company seems to have grown quite a bit during the austerity years. What's all that about?

**DE:** I think the projects that we do now attract a different funding model. The time of austerity is a time we couldn't get grants for big shows. And places like the Barbican started to cut back as well. After 2011 [when Duckie produced two Barbican runs, *Lullaby* and *Copyright Christmas*], we had to pull the drawbridge up a bit and think, 'What are we going to do next and why are we going to do it?' And I think 'why are we going to do it' was the most important point. *Copyright Christmas* was a good show; it wasn't a brilliant show and we realised we'd been asked to do something in the main house and we didn't have an idea so we dreamed up an idea. Before that, our shows had had some incubation period and had time to pilot and to play and naturally work out a way to make them great. With *Copyright Christmas*, we didn't get that opportunity. I think that's now bled into everything that we do: we do a pilot or a mini project, find a way to make it work that serves the community that it's for. Then we can go, 'We've got it. We can move forward and get some funding and make good work'.

**EM:** There's also something around austerity which does create – when you're political, which we all are – a sense of urgency which everybody's feeling again now with this lurch to the right.

**SC:** When you become middle-aged, I think you want to do something that's just gonna kind of work rather than when you're young you want to make statements and change the world. Of course, we still want to change the world, massively, but actually you can change the world in a small way every day through your actions.

**EM:** And when you move to right on a national scale, the language naturally starts to pathologise groups and force people into sub-groups – single mothers, NEETs [young people not in education, employment or training], stuff like that. People are boxed into population groups like they're broken. And that comes straight down into funding and there is a sort of natural fit there with Duckie's development as something that works with audience-specific groups. I don't think we've ever pathologised people but the fact that we are audience-specific meant that when we were developing *The Posh Club*, for instance, we could make use of that language. It's very uncomfortable. I remember feeling slightly sick about it at the time but it neatly fits, in a weird and slightly unpleasant way, with austerity politics.

**BW:** **So you're conscious of this tension where you're tactically navigating neoliberal structures of competition and othering while trying to create holding forms that offer collective care and expression?**

**EM:** It's really difficult. When I'm applying for funding for The Posh Club, I'll talk about social isolation and building social connections, which it absolutely does. We've got really strong evidence that's true. But that has become a dominant narrative because there's an interest from government in reducing the burden on statutory services of our ageing population, yada yada yada, so there's money there. Whereas the stories I'm actually more interested in might be to do with intergenerational relationships, relationships between a queer company and the church [which hosts some Posh Clubs]. I really resent that because there is so much nuance and colour and joy and beauty in this project that gets clouded by the very loud voice of neoliberalism. If funders are interested in only one narrative, which is about health and wellbeing, then I will present that to them as the dominant narrative but I won't allow that narrative to dominate in the space in which the work happens. You don't walk into The Posh Club and think, 'Oh, this is an anti-loneliness project'. You just don't. You just go, 'What the fuck is happening in this lovely, beautiful, magic thing?!'

**BW: It's just an uncomfortable tension you have to deal with?**

**EM:** I don't think there's an answer to it. It's just being vigilant. We talk about it constantly, the three of us, how to navigate those waters. And there's going to be a massive shift again now and I have zero clue, literally, what to do. We'll just have to figure it out.

**BW: Since 1994, Duckie has cultivated enduring relationships with thousands of artists, venues, punters and organisations. How has that happened and what have the challenges been?**

**SC:** We've remained hands-on and we're not getting too big. I don't think we can get any bigger, really. You know, we don't franchise anything out, we're pretty hands-on with all the projects and we treat them all delicately and with diligence.

**DE:** I think some of it is also about enjoying what we do and that love comes through and it inspires the people that we work with – the artists and the volunteers and the staff and everything – and just being as generous as possible. We can't pay everybody a million pounds but we can buy them a drink at the end of it and make sure they're fed and support them wherever possible and just provide an enjoyable working relationship with them. And I think lots of people don't get that in the world.

**EM:** And it is completely possible just to be nice to people, do you know what I mean? I don't think it's that complicated. But building a culture of kindness and inclusivity and all the rest of it does involve making decisions about things.

**BW: There have also been times over the years when some people have not felt so welcomed by Duckie, with concerns about representation or inclusion raised by some women and people of colour, for instance. Do you try to balance ideas of leadership and what's fun for you with listening and accountability?**

**DE:** I would say Simon has always been very committed to trying new things and bringing new people into our work and our organisation – more than lots of people I've worked with over the years in different places. And not being scared about new ideas and thoughts and working practices. It's not always an easy thing to take on. Much as we'd all like to be the most liberal people we can be, it's not always easy. And it's not always comfortable. And it takes some doing.



**SC:** It's complicated, isn't it? It's complicated and it doesn't sit easy with us and we do wrestle with it and we do fail a lot, you know. The commercial club on a Saturday night [which is predominantly attended by cis gay white men] is a good example of our failure of being accessible to people and, say, The Slaughterhouse Club is a brilliant example of being accessible to people. But it's something that we've failed at a lot and it's something that we struggle with, that we're conscious about and that we think about.

**EM:** And telling the difference between those scenarios can sometimes be a really fine line that changes over time as well. Sometimes in the past you've thought, 'Well, build a club yourself, these things are available to whoever wants to apply for these grants'. And then you learn a bit more and go, 'Oh, yeah, right, sorry about that. That was a really dickish thing to think 'cause I didn't know big these barriers are, how they work, how they intersect'. It's a really good question, it comes up all the time. Constantly.

**SC:** The recent QTIBPOC work [including the Duckie Family series led by Kayza Rose and Campbell X and the QTIBPOC Creatives programme led by Aakash Barania, Azara Meghie and Lazana Shabazz] is a really good example of how complicated it is to support a group of people that obviously need support but not dominate. That whole balance is, I think, gonna be at the centre of our work for the next few years. It's a big responsibility and a big opportunity and it's really complicated and quite tricky.

**EM:** One of the things I've learned over the last few years is that you're going to make loads of mistakes. Obviously, it feels really personally risky and you don't want to make mistakes but you do and, when you do, what do you do about it?

**SC:** I think that's fair, yeah. You have to be vulnerable when you're negotiating with people and trying to work stuff out, not pretending to be Billy Big-Bollocks or the one with all the answers because you're sure to be the one with none of the answers if you're like that. You know, it's a complicated game. Politics, relationships, art, culture, society, money, power, being in a room with people, working with people, putting on shows with people, in this city, in this country. It's complicated stuff. And of course it's also fascinating and wonderful and better than working in Tesco selling cans of beans but it's tricky.

**BW:** **Duckie operates from a position of what you might call contingent privilege. In a certain sense, it's small and fragile and vulnerable in the UK in 2019 but, in another sense, it's big and powerful and influential and what it does matters. And those things are both true at the same time.**

**EM:** That's right. And you have to constantly zoom in and zoom right back out and zoom in and zoom right back out if you want to figure it out on a day-to-day basis. That's a really good way of looking at it. And we do take it seriously, I think. In the last couple of years, we've learned so much. We're having conversations with funders who want me to give them answers and I just say, 'I can't answer you. I don't know what the answer to that is'. It's come up a lot with the QTIBPOC work and thinking, 'I wouldn't have done that a few years ago'. That's a bit risky, saying to a funder, 'I don't know', but it's actually true and I feel like with that work, more than some of the other stuff, it's really important to be authentic and truthful about it. 'Cause I don't know the answer. 'How are you going to remove barriers?' 'I don't know. We're gonna try this stuff. It might work. It might not. I don't know.'

**BW: Duckie’s community projects are resilient in themselves – they run over months and years – and also aim to build certain kinds of resilience for their participants.**

**SC:** We got fed up with making up shows that ran for a month then we took the set down the recycling. It seemed ridiculous. You do all this work on these massive things called theatre shows and then you do them for a month and then you dismantle it and you wouldn’t do it again. Or you might store it somewhere, paying an arm and a leg, and then drag it out four years later. Just seems ridiculous. So, because we come from a culture of club promoters, we decided, ‘Let’s stop all that. Let’s just open clubs and keep those clubs running’, and that’s what we do.

**BW: This is a leading question but why is it good to have clubs that keep running?**

**SC:** It’s service. It’s everything. It’s like church. To me, it makes loads more sense to have a club for people that you go to, week in, week out, and that’s a proper service rather than some silly Christmas-tree, showy-offy thing that you do once a year. No, you do it regularly and that’s why it’s hard work and not very glamorous. Because most days we’ve got shows on somewhere: shows, events, workshops, things. You know, we have a lot of output.

**DE:** That’s quite particular to us. We don’t have a venue. We don’t have anything that’s ours. We just sit in the kitchen and make these projects up. Other theatres have their Christmas show every year and it keeps them all afloat for 12 months but we never had that opportunity or ability.

**SC:** Also, it don’t pay the rent, does it? When you finish the show, there’s no more wages so what does everyone do then? We have to lay off all the performers, lay off all the staff. That’s no good. So that’s why we got into this clubs business. We’ve always been in the business of clubs but in the middle of our career we went through this showbusiness thing and then we went back to clubs and that is about resilience. It’s about trying not to be unemployed, actually.

**BW: With the summer-school projects, those seem planned, among other things, to help young performers survive professionally in the existing capitalist world. Is that intentionally baked in?**

**SC:** Yeah, it has to be in the DNA. It’s the Ursula Martinez model. [Performance artist Martinez has been a core Duckie collaborator from the start as well as developing a successful international solo practice. She led the 2016 summer school.] Be more like Ursula, that’s what we teach the young people. Get grafting, come up with great ideas, earn a living, be economical – that’s what Dicky teaches them – try to get something that’s going to have an audience and that’s going to work. You know, being quite crafty about it rather than the artist in the garret who does all the paintings and no one ever buys the paintings. It’s the opposite of that. It’s more the craftsman in terms of theatre or performance or events. And we try to pass that on. And, yes, it’s the one-man-band neoliberal model because that’s the culture we live in.

**EM:** But it’s not just young people that clubs make resilient. Something like The Posh Club, the fact that it’s on every week and everyone gets to know each other and you’re busy the whole time you’re there, it makes people fantastically resilient on multiple levels. It’s about repeating something and being really good at it and building relationships

between people. I mean, that's why I'm really reluctant to stop going to the Hastings Posh Club. They don't need me there any more but it serves me.

**DE:** It's also about your resilience, isn't it? In a lovely way. It feeds you.

**EM:** Yep. And we said that this Friday, after the election, you know, all of us [organisers and volunteers], we get in there at 7.30 in the morning and everybody was in bits.

**DE:** Apart from the Tory-voting older people.

**EM:** They weren't there at 7.30 in the morning. And I said to them – there were some quite tearful people – 'Let The Posh Club serve you a little bit today. It sounds so cheesy but let it serve you. We're all feeling a bit shit so it will cheer us up. Let's let it cheer us up.' And it did. We sort of came out and went, 'Thank God for that, actually. A day of being really busy in a room with people you know well and have worked with'. It's so brilliant, all these mad old people that you volunteer with or whatever, and it does make us resilient as human beings.

**SC:** And us as human beings and workers – me or Emmy or Dicky, who have worked for 10, 20, 30, 40 years, work off your laptop, work from home, work outside the home, come together, have meetings, all this stuff that we do. You have to – and we do pass this on to the young people – you have to find a model. Like yourself and all the different stuff that you do, Ben – we have to find models that are going to actually succeed in our lives. And part of that is trying not to bully each other and make our lives even worse for each other. If you're in an environment where someone's always having a go at you all the time ... Life's hard enough anyway, do you know what I mean?

**DE:** It's about supporting each other. I think that certainly came through in the DHSS [summer school] stuff: being there for each other and looking after each other and giving support when it's needed and critical thought, if it's needed when you're trying something out. You can't just go, 'Yeah, that's brilliant' when you know it's not true. So learning how to give that in an engaging way, so people will take it on board and do something about it and giving them the power to work with each other in that way. It's not always an easy thing for young people these days, with social media and so on.

**SC:** How to be a critical friend rather than just say 'Everything's great with you' and not believe it. Or the capitalist model, the survival of the fittest, try harder, keep the pressure on. I hate that. Fuck you with 'keep the pressure on', do you know what I mean? And that happens a lot out there, and more to young people than to anyone else. It doesn't happen to middle-aged people like us as much, if we're in cushy nice jobs like this. But out there, in the fucking horrors of capitalism in the city, it's like, 'Fucking hell! Is that the way you think you're going to get good out of people?' They're just not on your side 'cause they think it's a competition. They think you need to lose in order for them to win. It's like a fight. We might as well just have a fist-fight then. Come on! Do you know what I mean?

**BW:** Meeting young artists with care and support also keeps Duckie resilient by bringing in new performers. And it's interesting how the summer-school projects have mutated, from quite short programmes, highly focused on creating a turn, to the longer-running, less defined programmes like QTIBPOC Creatives.

**SC:** That's Emmy's fault, that is. She was the one that said, and Dicky very much supported her, 'Don't just do it. Test it. Do it slowly. Get a little bit of money, do it a little bit, do it this way, do it that way, change it'. Same with The Posh Club. Since we were young, we were always making experimental theatre so we're used to that. We're used to experimenting and the idea is that you experiment until you get it really good and then you roll it out. But then, when you roll it out, you keep it going really well and then you gotta keep it fresh.

**EM:** All of that is about resilience as well. The Posh Club is so resilient because we've done so many of them and people are so invested in it and they keep coming back so you can frighten the life out of them or have full frontal male nudity and they'll forgive you.

**DE:** Not in Hastings.

**EM:** [Laughs.] Not in Hastings. Well, that was only the vicar.

**SC:** In Hackney, they don't forgive you if you don't put it on next week.

**EM:** Exactly! But that builds resilience around everything. Repeating things, doing the club format instead of the theatre format. If you've put all your money into a theatre run that you're doing for a month and it's a bit shit, there's no coming back from that. It's just a bit depressing and you got bad reviews and you've got to go home and feel a bit shit and get up. Whereas we can be a bit shit quite a lot if we want to.

**DE:** I've heard that.

**EM:** [Laughs.] Do you know what I mean?

**SC:** Because it's a marathon, it's not a sprint.

**EM:** Exactly. And it makes the work really good because you're constantly practicing it and going, 'Okay, that didn't work. Never mind, we'll have another go next week.' 'Oh, that didn't work, never mind we'll have another go next week.' 'Oh, that did work!'

**BW:** **It's a process, not a product. And it mutates.**

**SC:** Yeah. And also our audience understand failure. They want failure. People do understand failure – apart from Crawley. But even Crawley is learning the value of failure and that failure is an integral part of anything that is going to be reaching out a little bit. Otherwise, without failure, you just get banality.

**EM:** But it's much more fun, failing, and much less risky if you know you're going to get another go.

**BW:** **So having some give built into these projects really helps their resilience.**

**DE:** An individual part of the package can break down and that's okay – or change or get better or get worse sometimes. If one particular person doesn't enjoy it that week – and that happens all the time – you can say. 'It's not for you this week. That's fine. Next week, it will be for you'.

**EM:** The Posh Club, the one that's repeated most, is changing and maturing all the time. I think that gives you so much resilience, allowing something to build over time. You've got to let it cook over time. That's what QTIBPOC Creatives is going back into now, isn't it? It's had a first go, loads of bits didn't work, some bits did work. It's like, 'Okay, we carry what

worked forward and give it another turn of the wheel'. More and more of Duckie's projects are working like that and less and less are working like the Barbican runs. Time and repetition is a huge factor in almost all of them now, I think. The fact of duration and repetition and the acceptance that, if you're going to be good at something, you need to put the hours in. If you really want to know what older people in their sixties in Hackney think then it takes a good few years. You can give them questionnaires and you can chat to them but, actually, when you've been doing this work year in year out with them, and you've been through a good few deaths and christenings and all the rest of it, then you start to hear their real opinions.

**BW: We've been talking about resilience. It's the theme of this journal issue and a common buzzword for funders. Are there downsides to focusing on resilience?**

**SC:** It's not punk rock, is it? It's not knock-it-all-down-and-start-again, is it? It's not revolutionary.

**EM:** But you could be really fragile and unresilient by knocking something down and starting again. You could be sabotaging things and destroying yourself and your work. It could come from a really unhealthy, unresilient place – or it could come from a place of confidence and resilience to go, 'Actually I don't wanna do that again. It was all right but it wasn't as good as it could be'.

**BW: What happens if resilience is framed as a moral good? Where does that leave people who, for whatever reason, are less resilient?**

**SC:** On the scrapheap, like they always were. Because who's not resilient? Young people, poor people, people that are not loved, people without families, people with mental health problems, addicts, alcoholics. These people are not resilient and you can see the results of this every day. Just walk outside the door. You'll see them in the street everywhere and they're not living resilient lives. Young people don't need rock 'n' roll from us. They don't need us to crash and burn. They need us to be reliable.

**BW: Do you think promoting resilience can overlap with individualism?**

**SC:** No, I think it's the opposite to resilience, individualism. Individuals aren't resilient. It's a fucking myth. It's bullshit. Individuals aren't resilient. People need other people. Egos are fragile and self-esteem is fragile. People need people. We're queers, you know, and we need families.

**DE:** People in the street probably don't use the word 'resilient' very often 'cause they don't think about it. I don't think we talked about being resilient until about 10 years ago, in terms of what we were doing. I think we've made ourselves resilient because we care about who our communities are.

**EM:** We're resilient because we're together and we work together, not because we're individuals, do you know what I mean? And Duckie's resilient because it's a huge community of people who are really invested and loyal to the work over long periods of time and that creates personal and organisational resilience. And even the most mentally well and robust individuals, like Dicky, still are stronger when we're together. It's really important, you know?

**SC:** We are a network and a collective. We're not based around the ideas of a particular individual. Our strength comes from our connection to each other. Not that we're not all important. We've all got our special thing and we try not to tread on each other's toes, to let you excel at the thing you're really good at or the thing you want to do or whatnot. Ultimately, often arts is about serving someone's grand vision and I think this is a little bit different to that.

**EM:** Massively so. And certainly, for myself, I feel quite protected and, as an individual, much more resilient because I have the protection of being part of Duckie.

**SC:** Oh, definitely.

**DE:** I think lots of people feel like that about Duckie. Performers and guests and volunteers. It's almost like a big group therapy session a lot of the time.

**SC:** You know, we're based in London in 2020. Fucking hell, it really is hard to survive, I think, for the precariat, for the young, for anyone vulnerable.

**EM:** Let's see what happens. Fucking hell. Last year was a bumpy ride. Not looking forward to the next one.

**SC:** Here's to the next 25 years.

## Disclosure statement

Ben Walters completed a collaborative doctoral award in partnership with Duckie at Queen Mary University of London and occasionally works for Duckie as a freelance writer and performer.

## Notes on contributor

*Ben Walters* is an independent writer and researcher based in London. His doctoral research at Queen Mary University of London conceptualised a range of community-specific projects by queer performance collective Duckie as 'homemade mutant hope machines'. As 'Dr Duckie', Ben shares pragmatic 'hope-machine' thinking through writing, talks, workshops and online.

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