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Girls’ bodies, drama and unruliness
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This article examines some of the performance outcomes from a practised-based research project that took place with adolescent girls attending an after-school drama club. Participants experimented with slapstick humour in a series of workshops, before presenting their own devised physical comedy performance for a live audience. Comic performances are explored in relation to the opposition between comedy and what is coded as appropriate feminine behaviour, and those current regimes of gender that encourage girls to discipline and control the body in pursuit of a feminine ideal. Through detailed analysis of girls’ practical endeavours, and by privileging their personal observations and reflections on working in the style, I argue that slapstick enabled girls to make unruly experiments with the body that allowed normative conceptions of gender to be temporally undone. However, I also reflect on how this emancipatory process was troubled when girls watched recordings of the work and became spectators to their own transgression.

Comedy, slapstick and the new feminine ideal

In her discussion of the marginalisation of women’s humour in everyday life, Kotthoff outlines how historically the patriarchal drive to contain and control female corporeality has had implications for women’s access to the comic arena:

> It was not regarded as well behaved for women to play the clown and fool around. Comedy plays with distortion of the body, and grimaces distort the face. All this was incompatible with a societal politics of femininity, which required women to be pretty, modest, and decent. (2006, 5)

Today, the opposition between comic performance and what is coded as appropriate feminine behaviour continues to inscribe humour as a masculine practice and fuel perceptions of women as inferior doers of comedy (Anderson Wagner 2011; Kalviknes Bore 2010). As a comic form which is first and foremost of the active body, slapstick can be said to present a very particular challenge to the female comedy performer. Based on boisterous knockabout physicality, heightened pretend violence and frequent use of sight gags and pratfalls, it represents a double affront to the norm of passive femininity. The study upon which this article is based arose from my interest in exploring the extent to which such regulation of gender might influence girls’ approaches to comic performance in the contemporary drama classroom. More specifically, it took influence from Butler’s now familiar theorising of gender as ‘a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame’ (1990, 33) to investigate how

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girls, working within the context of a school drama club, might negotiate the regulatory norms associated with femininity when responding to and engaging in the physically demonstrative work of slapstick comedy. As Segal (2008) explains, within Butler’s regulatory frame:

> gender and sexuality are fully liberated from any stable notion of intrinsic sexed identity, female or male, from any secure attributions of identity, feminine or masculine, and from any fixed bodily markings, except as performatively monitored and incited in discourse through a process of cultural reiteration, framed within a coercively imposed hetero-sexualization of desire. Bodily actions are rendered intelligible via, and only via, oppositional markers binding femininity/passivity/femaleness and masculinity/activity/maleness. (382)

Following Butler, McRobbie has argued that in post-feminist neoliberal societies policing of femininity has been bolstered by the emergence of new self-regulating systems, such as pervasive fashion and beauty regimes, that install desirability as a new feminine ideal (2009, 54–93). That for girls adolescence can be a period of uncertainty and crisis (Gallagher 2001, 35), the notion of desirability as key to the successful performance of ‘girl’ is particularly potent (Hatton 2013, 159). As Paechter notes, girls increasingly are ‘expected to treat their bodies as objects’, paying attention to ‘the body’s surface, its outward appearance’ (2013, 265). While in their study of attitudes to physical activity, Whitehead and Biddle found girls reluctant to be active in case it negatively influenced feminine images; ‘they did not want to get sweaty during physical activity and were concerned with their appearances afterwards – many girls commented on their concerns regarding messy hair, ruined make-up and generally looking untidy’ (2008, 246).

However, in maintaining that sex and gender are not static conditions of the body, but the product of unstable reiterative processes, Butler also finds an opportunity for possible re-materializations and re-articulations of behaviour that have the potential to undermine the very norms that gender regulation seeks to enforce (1993, 2). As a supportive site in which risk-taking is valued (see McLauchlan and Winters 2014), the drama classroom might also represent an ideal space for girls to experiment with absurd and demonstrative physical action contrary to the feminine norm.

The particular appeal of drama to girls has been explored extensively by Gallagher (2001) and Hatton (2003, 2013). Both advocate drama as a girl-friendly practice whereby girls’ sense of ‘belonging, self-esteem and agency can be playfully rehearsed and revised’ (Hatton 2013, 156). Equally, as film-critic Kathleen Rowe argues, comedy is itself rich in disruptive potential for feminist appropriation. In her celebration of female unruliness, and taking influence from Helene Cixous’ provocative essay ‘The Laugh of Medusa’ (1976), Rowe celebrates the unruly woman as one who gleefully violates the age-old sanction women learn against ‘making a spectacle of themselves’ by exploiting comedy as a site of transgression and inversion (1995, 2). In particular she is drawn to Medusa, as re-imagined by Cixous, as one who embodies the anarchic possibilities of female bodily excess.

**Describing the study**

From January until May 2013, I was employed as a teacher of Performing Arts at a co-educational, multicultural school (aged 11–16) in Manchester, England. As part of this
role, I agreed to oversee the extra-curricular drama club and having already decided to investigate the relationship between physical comedy and gender, I concluded that working with this group provided an ideal opportunity for a practised-based research project. The extra-curricular context, whereby students chose to participate after the official school day had ended, provided what might be regarded as a safe and familiar setting for participants to experiment with the slapstick style. Occurring over a period of eight weeks, the project consisted of weekly one hour workshop sessions. Participants explored slapstick humour through a series of exercises and games, before devising their own physical comedy performance for a live audience. A core participant group of 12 Year 7 and Year 8 girls (aged 12–13) emerged from those attending the drama club. This group reflected the diverse cultural make-up of the school, and featured differing levels of previous drama experience. Up to four other girls attended all or some of the sessions as non-research participants, often making a dynamic contribution to what took place. Importantly, two boys did attend some of the sessions, but they dropped out after a few weeks, thus leading to an all-girl group. Although the reasons behind this are rich for further investigation, the main focus of this article is girls’ participation.

As the teacher responsible for organising and running the drama club sessions, I was very much working on the ‘inside’ of what took place. Acknowledging concerns that to occupy such a position must inevitably compromise researcher objectivity, Gallagher maintains that it might also be advantageous, given that ‘familiarity with the teacher can make it easier for students to describe their experiences and feelings’ (2001, 15). Even so, it was important that I remained alert to the wider implications of my privileged position in relation to both the participants and what took place. This was no more evident than when I was required to reconsider my original methodological approach. As Hughes, Kidd and McNamara observe, what can be the confusing ‘messes’ of unpredictable applied theatre contexts mean notions of method and methodology as ‘epistemologically secure, finite, discrete sets of procedures fit for the purpose of discovering certain, measurable findings’ can prove inappropriate (2011, 188). On beginning to work with participants it became apparent that my initial research outline had framed them as objects rather than subjects of the process. From the outset it was clear that the girls participating in this study had no wish to be regarded as objects, and that their practical engagement with the slapstick style offered more interesting and nuanced perspectives on the research focus than I had initially imagined. It became necessary to adapt my research design to something more attuned and sensitive to emerging creative and social themes. My final methodology might be thought of as both embedded in the creative practice of participants, and as favouring their articulations of experience rather than seeking to find a clearly defined answer to the research question (2011, 194). Attention shifted onto detailed observations and analysis of video recordings made of the workshops sessions. The girls’ own reflections and views, as expressed in a series of paired semi-structured interviews, also provided a rich data source. These interviews were designed to enable participants to share their thoughts and observations on both doing slapstick and, significantly, their responses to watching recordings of their work. They were then transcribed, coded and categorised according to key ideas and shared themes. As Gallagher further suggests, privileging of participant explanations is also a means by which the teacher, working on the
inside of the research process, might strive to achieve researcher distance in their accounts of what takes place (2001, 16).

In the following discussion of some of the research outcomes from this study, I argue that an unruly woman did make her disruptive presence felt in the performance work outlined. She was welcomed by the girls into the workshop sessions and was adopted as their troublesome ally. This unruly spirit created opportunities to act the body differently, and made a telling contribution to how normative assumptions of gender appropriate behaviour were negotiated and ultimately challenged. However, like Medusa tamed by her captured image, I shall also consider how this emancipatory process was troubled when girls watched recordings of the work and became spectators to their own transgression.

‘Making massive actions’ – becoming unruly

One of the first questions I asked the girls during my informal interviews with them was ‘How would you describe physical comedy?’ The answers they provided established immediately their understanding of the physically emphatic nature of the style:

- Over-the-top-expressions
- Making massive actions
- Really emphasise your drama skills

The emphasis on physically demonstrative action can be related to Rowe’s spectacle making woman who displays her body in an exaggerated and foolish manner, undermining the patriarchal feminine ideal of the discreet and passive woman. But how did this awareness of the heightened physicality of slapstick translate into girls’ practical endeavours?

‘The chair’ exercise involved working in pairs to create a short non-verbal comic sequence around a single chair. One member of the pair took possession of the chair, while the other member devised a suitably comic method of encouraging her partner to give it up. In one segment taken from workshop footage, Shannon and Lucy provide an interesting example of how this exercise encouraged each girl to make an unruly spectacle:

Lucy is sitting on the chair while Shannon moves slowly towards her with long exaggerated strides, her right hand held aloft as if clutching a knife. As she nears the chair Lucy sees her, registers the threat with a look of comic fear, before giving the chair up. Shannon then takes possession of the chair, only for Lucy to momentarily compose herself by taking a deep extravagant breath, before dashing up to the chair, tapping Shannon on the shoulder, and shaking her body in a wild and manic fashion. Shannon demonstratively leaps off the chair as if perturbed by Lucy’s strange behaviour. Lucy triumphantly seizes it. Shannon then doubles over clutching her stomach and turns her knees inward. She has a look of desperation on her face. She is feigning needing a wee. She slowly weaves her way towards Lucy and with each step she suggests she might not hold on for much longer. Understandably Lucy gives up the chair. Defeated she comes up with her own plan. She pretends to hold a mobile phone and dial up a number. She then confidently walks past Shannon as if having an amusing conversation. Shannon becomes interested. Maybe the phone is supposed to belong to her? Unable to contain
her curiosity she follows Lucy, who playfully dangles the imaginary phone in front of her before throwing it away and racing to the chair. Shannon retaliates with violence, flicking Lucy on the head until she can stand it no more. The sequence ends with Lucy suddenly contorting her body and holding her hands to her mouth. She mimes retching as she moves towards Shannon. She then taps her on the arm before opening her mouth wide and pretending to extravagantly vomit all over her enemy.

The opportunities for slapstick humour that Shannon and Lucy found in this exercise fully reflect the absurd and excessive qualities of the form. The structure of the exercise also taps into what Bailes has identified as slapstick’s economy of failure, in that the inability to succeed in the completion of a task is what propels the repetition to begin or try again, and in so doing to discover original or alternative solutions (2010, 41). What is interesting is the way in which Shannon and Lucy exploit this repetitive framework to generate solutions that not only embrace hyperbolized physical performance and unpredictable, cartoon-like violence, but which also enables them to indulge in unsavoury aspects of the abject body. In their performance bodily fluids are used as grotesquely comic methods of persuasion. Noting Bakhtin’s emphasis on ‘the lower bodily stratum’ (2005, 87), Stott outlines how the comic possibilities of the abject body, and its embodiment in the grotesque, have long functioned as a mechanism for revealing the frail foundations upon which civility is built. Pitted against the drive to control female corporeality, the abject and the grotesque take on the added significance of releasing the material excesses of the female body that patriarchal authority would seek to contain. Remembering the positing of desirability as key to the successful presentation of ‘girl’, the question remains as to whether this referencing of the abject would have occurred if boys had been present. Certainly, for some of the participants, the presence of a male-gaze would have negatively influenced performance outcomes:

boys can be idiots and they can be nasty. So if you’re acting silly or something that we’re doing they could laugh and spread it across the school because they’re idiots

I love drama but then the boys might think ‘look at her’ and I might get a bit scared of what the boys might think of the girls.

In these comments the operation of Butler’s regulatory law would appear to be exposed in girls’ perceptions that they would risk ridicule from boys if they performed in a similarly excessive manner in a mixed-sexed context. It might be suggested that such observations point to the importance of a supportive ethos that emerged from participants’ doing of physical comedy together, and that this was crucial in creating a safe and productive aesthetic space in which it was acceptable to experiment with the slapstick style. For one participant this supportive ethos was very much linked to the all-girl make-up of the group:

As all girls we all kind of connect and we’re all friends and we all know each other and know what we like and know what we don’t like. And it’s like a closer bond and I feel a bit more confident in front of girls than in front of boys.

Encouraged by this ethos of support, the girls were able to mount an even more anarchic assault on the idealised female image.
Subverting the feminine ideal – sight gag

‘Can I help you’ is a basic improvisation exercise. One member of the group mimes an activity in the middle of a circle, while another member enters and asks ‘can I help you...’ do whatever activity is being mimed. The original performer then denies doing the supposed activity and suggests an alternative that the new performer has to then demonstrate. Clearly the more stimulating the suggestions the more fun the exercise is. Although this is equally dependent on the willingness and ability of participants to practically perform the proposed activities with confidence and imagination. The following describes the girls’ participation in this exercise during one of the workshop sessions:

The girls are sat in semi-circle facing the camera. Outside of the circle a balloon that one of the girls has brought into the session floats into shot. Shania starts the exercise by scrabbling around on the floor. Another girl, who I shall refer to as Girl A, enters the performance area. She mumbles something about ‘digging’ and Shania responds with ‘I’m not digging, I’m picking up slugs’. Girl A registers disgust on her face and makes an ‘uhhh’ sound. This develops into retching as she kneels down to do as Shania has asked. At the same time she tentatively pretends to pick up slugs using her forefinger and thumb. The rest of the group look on smiling but do not appear to find the situation overly amusing.

It is notable that the girls’ initial physical responses lacked dynamism and comic impact. What is interesting is how this mood of reticence changed quite suddenly:

Elise puts forward ‘having a baby’ as the proposed activity. Millie following looks duly nervous and she glances towards me and the camera and asks ‘Miss, do I have to?’ I reply ‘it’s up to you’. The rest of the group become a little more animated and Elise, who is now sitting down, physically offers advice by briefly widening her legs, clenching her fists, broadening her arms and grimacing. Jessica then helpfully suggests Millie turn away from the camera. Millie does so, sitting down with her back straight and her legs laid out flat in front of her. As she does Girl A shouts out ‘squeeze’ and this produces a ripple of laughter. Girl A continues to playfully offer encouragement with ‘push. Ahhh. Contractions. Squeeze’. The group respond with more laughter that is noticeably louder than what has gone before. Somebody asks ‘have you done this before?’ This could be directed at Girl A or Millie. Millie makes no attempt to act out the scene. Instead this is done verbally off camera by Girl A. She starts to breathe heavily and in short bursts. She then makes a sound suggestive of a woman pushing whilst in labour, before shouting ‘push’. More loud laughter. I intervene light-heartedly with ‘that’s enough. If you’ve had enough of having that baby that’s fine’. Millie quickly gets up and replies ‘yes’ before heading back to her chair.

Hatton has observed that girls often find comedy useful when dealing with troubling aspects of drama that touch upon how the category of ‘woman’ is defined (2003, 150). A similar response might be detected in the girls’ reaction to the introduction of childbirth into the exercise. The physical stresses and bodily excesses associated with childbirth return us to the theme of abjection and the grotesque and are in conflict with the contemporary ideal of the sanitised, desirable female body. At the same time the act of giving birth, and subsequent motherhood, remains inextricably bound to how dominant discourse shapes understanding of what counts as authentic female experience. These challenging aspects of the childbirth theme are manifest in the way in which Millie initially registers her reluctance to make a show of having a
baby, and then becomes essentially a spectator to the spectacle making contributions of the girls around her. In suggesting that Millie turn away from the camera to act out giving birth, Jessica is perhaps also showing a heightened awareness of it as a silent but nevertheless potentially judgemental spectator.

As the exercise unfolds, it is Girl A that drives the action. Importantly, she does this off-camera and from a position of safety at the edge of the circle. Her contribution returns us to Bakhtin and the anarchic deconstruction of the civilised body. Her performance serves to radically alter the mood of the group, and entices the other girls to become disreputable midwives to the next stage of the creative process:

Elise points out Shania needs a go at acting something out. Shania looks at me and the camera with an expression of amused reluctance. As she gets up Millie retrieves the balloon from outside the circle and stands with it in her hand. Shania struggles through her giggles to say ‘can I help you have a baby?’ Millie then triumphantly hands the balloon to Shania and laughingly states ‘yes, you can have it for me’ before sitting down. Shania clutches the balloon to her chest and walks backwards and forwards smiling. I interject with ‘oh, it's a baby. Look at the baby’. I then start to ask the group to give Shania an instruction to do with holding a baby, but I am cut short by Millie who loudly and energetically begins to make the sound of a baby crying. Other girls join in and there is a chorus of crying. Shania continues to walk clutching the ‘baby’. She occasionally interacts with it by moving it up and down in her arms or wagging her finger at its imagined mouth. Struggling to be heard I ask ‘what else might this baby do?’ and this instantly triggers Millie to pretend to be sick. The laughing becomes more raucous. Jessica shouts ‘shut up’. This brings about a moment of quiet. Then Millie screeches, Lucy pretends to be audibly sick and Girl A in a high pitched babyish voice shouts ‘I want that toy’ repeatedly. I try to regain the group's attention with ‘sssh’. Meanwhile Shania, presumably responding to the baby/child's demand for a toy, mouths ‘no’ at the balloon, smacks it and bounces it on the ground. Numerous voices overlap and the mood is chaotic. Shannon shouts out that the baby should be sick and I pick up on this by urgently addressing Shania with ‘the baby's going to be sick, what are you going to do?’ More sick noises from the group. Then Shania jerks her body away from the balloon and pauses momentarily as if thinking about what to do. She then pulls open her blazer with one hand, and with the other holds the balloon in such a way as to suggest the baby is being sick in her inside pocket.

Millie’s use of the discarded balloon is an inventive intervention, but it is not enough to encourage Shania to attempt to act out having a baby, and her nervous clutching of it clearly triggers my suggestion that she use the balloon to act out holding a baby instead. Stimulated by Girl A’s comic exposure of the indignities of giving birth, the girls set about gleefully unfixing the idealised image of mother and child. At first Shania only tentatively joins in this process, interacting with the balloon/baby to give the impression she is caring for it. But this baby is far from ideal. It cries incessantly, is sick and is demanding. And despite my attempts to get Shania to respond in a more dynamic physical way, it is the baby, as created by the vocal and physical contributions of the other girls, who has centre-stage.

Bailes has argued that the gag in slapstick represents an ‘instance of revolt, an interruption and subversion of progressive or hierarchical order’, and as such offers ‘formal resistance to the cohesive world that narrative seeks to establish’ (2010, 41). If we accept the idea of ‘woman’ as maternal is representative of one such narrative established within culture, then the girls’ rowdy dismantling of idealised motherhood
can itself be recognised as an instance of revolt. Not to be left out, Shania eventually makes her own contribution to this subversive act. Stirred into action by her demanding baby, and in keeping with the cartoon-like violence around which slapstick revolves, she becomes the embodiment of the ‘bad’ mother, smacking the balloon and then bouncing it on the ground. Then with her final act she improvises a sight gag all of her own, foregrounding her motherly incompetence further by offering her blazer pocket as receptacle for the baby’s vomit.

In this exercise the girls seize the opportunity to undermine the motherly role, culminating in Shania’s darkly comic, violent rejection of the balloon baby and ultimately her rejection of the maternal instinct altogether with her vomit-in-the-pocket gag. This gag, worthy of the best traditions of slapstick, emerges out of the girls’ channelling of the disorderly but potentially rich spirit of the unruly woman that comedy unleashes. Like Cixous’ laughing Medusa, they openly mock the idealised and restrictive codes of gender, and within the frame of the exercise momentarily undo what it means to be a ‘woman’. But can any wider significance be attached to this momentary assault on prescribed gender codes? Maybe, if we equate doing drama with Butler’s identification of fantasy as that which ‘moves us beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility’ (2004, 28). In the following observation, one of the girls appears to recognise doing drama as enabling of just such fantasy-making:

Because when you are doing drama you can be silly … I’m like a different person in drama, I’ll be silly but everywhere else I’m kind of quiet. Sensible … In drama you can recreate a character and you can be that character and make up personalities and things

Doing drama is here clearly valued as an opportunity to indulge in being ‘silly’. The girls’ comic subversion of idealised femininity might be thought of, therefore, as a small but important act of resistance against the regulatory laws of gender, enabling differing ways of being to be not only imagined but embodied.

The ‘silent spectator’ and the critical I/eye

In channelling the spirit of the unruly woman, the girls actively seized the comic site as an opportunity to play the female body differently. However, it is also the case that this emancipatory process was complicated when girls became spectators to their own unruliness. As a spectacle-making woman Medusa did not escape punishment. She was rendered grotesque and her final degradation was to have her power to petrify curbed, when Perseus captured her unruly image in his shield. I would now like to think through this dynamic in relation to what was the silent spectator to girls’ comic exploits throughout this project, the camera.

Awareness of the presence of the camera has already been noted when Jessica suggested Millie turn away from it to pretend to give birth. Another interesting instance is captured in rehearsal footage in which the girls are waiting to perform a short comic sequence in pairs. One girl addresses another, sat astride her chair, with ‘close your legs’. This prompts giggles and the other girl responds laughingly with ‘it’s my position’. While the mood remains light-hearted, it is tinged with awareness that a certain sense of feminine propriety has been breached. Another girl makes this explicit when she assertively points to the camera and states ‘the camera is on you
know’, thus drawing attention to it as witness to the little act of transgression taking place. However, other footage reveals the girls becoming less concerned about the camera’s gaze. There are moments of highly physical play in which demonstrative pushing, shoving and slapping occur outside of any dramatic frame and in full view of the camera. In another instance, the camera has inadvertently been left running at the end of a session when I am not in the room. Apparently aware that it is on, two of the girls actively mock it. One stares directly at it, momentarily waves and then launches a kick at it. The other girl follows this by provocatively walking up to the lens, jiggling her hips and repeating ‘Do you like me? Do you like me camera?’ The girls here appear to extend the licence to make a bodily spectacle beyond the dramatic boundaries of the session and in spite of a potentially critical gaze. We might assume, therefore, that as a silent spectator to the transgressive performances aimed at it, the camera’s capacity to inhibit in this moment is negated. But, of course, although silent the camera has marked transgressive performances in the very act of recording, and this allows for a connection to be made with Peggy Phelan’s now familiar argument regarding the ontology of performance itself.

Phelan asserts that performance exists only in the present and any attempt to save, record or document it can lead only to it becoming something other than performance (1993, 146). There are traces of this understanding of performance in one girl’s perturbed reaction to watching a recording of her work:

I don’t necessarily care if people take the mick out of me for what I like doing. It’s just seeing myself isn’t right. If I perform in front of someone else it’s over, unless they’ve recorded it they can’t show me again. They can remind me of it but they can’t physically make me remember the whole thing.

She appears to privilege performance’s ephemerality and there is a sense of abandon in her comment that she does not care what people think, or say, once the performance is over. She suggests that even the act of marking verbally would not be enough to affect her enjoyment in the performance moment. In creating a clear distinction between what she feels in the moment of performance, and how she feels watching the recording, this participant underscores Phelan’s notion that in its reproduction performance becomes something other than itself. Other girls offered similar perspectives on how their performance was altered for them in its reproduction:

I enjoyed doing it but not watching it … You don’t realise you look that strange

It’s easier on stage because you don’t know what you look like, you don’t know if you look stupid or not.

In experiencing the shift from the ‘I’ of performer to the critical ‘I/eye’ of spectator, a process which positions the girls simultaneously as subject and object, what was essential and positive in the original moment of performance becomes distorted, even obliterated all together. Conditioned by gender regimes to be hypercritical of their bodies, the girls are struck by what they read as their own imperfect image:

When you can see yourself you can see all the imperfections that you have … it’s not nice.
I never like watching myself back plus I had my hair in a ponytail thing and that was just weird.

I don’t like it because I think I’ll always be judgemental saying my hair looks horrible and my face looks horrible and I just look horrible in it.

The girls’ reactions to watching footage of unruly performances raise questions about the potential of the recorded image to powerfully affect how girls relate to their performing selves. If, as Phelan tells us, ‘within the realm of the visible … women are seen always as Other’ (1993, 6), then we must be conscious of how the act of becoming spectator to their own transgressive acts is loaded with complexity for girls and supportive of processes of alienation from the self, whereby unruly female bodies become strange and perceived corporeal imperfections are horribly exposed. In relation to this project, it can be argued that the positioning of girls as spectators to their own unruliness enabled the transgressive image to become a mechanism for gender norms to be reinforced. Given that the use of video is ubiquitous in educational drama practice today, both to support teacher assessment and, significantly, as a tool for self and peer evaluation, it suggests that as researcher–practitioners we perhaps need to be more sensitive to its impact on girls.

Conclusion
Michael Anderson has recently argued that a post-normal world, defined by complexity, chaos and confusion, represents an opportunity for the field of Applied Theatre and Drama Education to offer the ‘shape-shifting’ power of the form as an answer to the ‘ambiguous, complicated realities’ of contemporary existence (2014, 114). For girls, post-normality entails the navigation of what is a confusing and contradictory social landscape riven with gender regulation. As such, the manner in which participants taking part in this project took advantage of the drama classroom as a supportive environment in which to act the body differently, could be said to endorse Hatton’s claim that ‘girls need drama’ (2003, 142). Indeed, it might even be suggested that in post-normal times girls need ‘all-girl’ drama. If, as Gallagher argued some 10 years ago, the mixed-sexed classroom represents an uneven playing field for girls (2001, 97), and given participant reflections on the potential of the male-gaze to inhibit dramatic expression, then the creation of a ‘girl-friendly-girl-only’ drama space in schools might be one way in which contemporary dominant thinking around gender can not only be practically explored but actively challenged. While perturbed reactions to watching transgressive performances remind us how deeply embedded the feminine ideal is, the union of drama education and physical comedy in this project did create one such small space of resistance. This chimes further with Anderson’s plea that in post-normal times we value more those little changes and small endeavours that constitute drama educational practice, but which are not so easily measured, assessed, or evaluated (2014, 115). Channelling the spirit of the unruly woman, the girls embraced physical excess, took delight in the grotesque and laughed openly at idealised notions of femininity. Although not transformative, regimes of gender continue to determine what it is possible for girls’ bodies to do and be, unruliness enabled a different way of doing bodies that exposed, at the very least, ‘realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation’ (Butler 2004, 217).
Keywords: girls and drama in secondary schools; girls and unruliness; slapstick; practised-based research

Notes on contributor
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