



“Putting the ‘cis’ into ‘sissy””: Humour, Sexuality and Contemporary Cabaret

Will Visconti

University of Sydney

will.visconti@sydney.edu.au

This paper discusses the ways in which two cabaret performers – Dusty Limits and Meow Meow - use humour to communicate ideas about sexuality, and as a means of challenging commonly-held attitudes. Their work also forms a bridge between older styles of performance like vaudeville or Weimar-era cabaret and contemporary popular culture, stylistically and in terms of their song choices. Through the use of “contestive humour” to signify and perform an act of protest, and by combining humour with social commentary, Dusty and Meow encourage audiences to not only think critically, but to laugh at themselves and to recognise the ridiculousness in situations around sex and sexuality.

Will Visconti is a writer and researcher currently based in Sydney. His primary areas of research are the arts, gender and transgression, particularly in relation to figures whose historical significance or contribution to their field has been overlooked.



Introduction

Within the *oeuvres* of many performers of cabaret and burlesque, sex and sexuality are key aspects, either in terms of the content, the personae of the performers concerned, or both. The primary exemplars of cabaret and burlesque whose work forms the basis of this article are the “kamikaze cabaret diva” Meow Meow, and the cabaret MC and singer Dusty Limits.¹ Both combine humour, comedy and discourse around sex and sexuality in sometimes different but often complementary ways. Dusty, for instance, relies more on comic song lyrics (often original compositions created in collaboration with his Musical Director and accompanist, Michael Roulston), whereas the bulk of Meow’s comedy lies in the exploitation of comic potential around pieces, or through the delivery of songs that may not be inherently funny (Kurt Weill’s *Surabaya Johnny* and Jacques Brel’s *Ne me quitte pas* being but two examples). Both Meow and Dusty have comic patter in between numbers; on occasion this patter extends to ad libs during numbers, and there exists an improvisational element to their shows, or giving the impression of improvisation.

Central to the work of these performers, and arguably many more *artistes* within the contemporary cabaret and burlesque scene, is the deployment of what Janet Holmes terms “contestive humour,” that is, the use of humour to signify lack of agreement and protest (Holmes 2000, 165). By joking about sexuality, Meow and Dusty shatter taboos around the subject by openly discussing it, and provoking serious discussion through comic performance. This has the effect of using humour as a “safety valve” for subjects or sentiments that may be otherwise difficult to discuss or express (Sanders 2004, 274). They are also aware of when not to joke about sexuality, or when the source of humour is more around attitudes or associated issues than sex itself (as with the public stance of the Church or of politicians regarding sexuality and its expression, or the treatment of sex in the media). In this regard they use humour as a form of resistance against oppression, prejudice and authority figures (Sanders 2004, 279). Such a practice links them back to earlier generations of performers, including Weimar-era Berlin and *fin-de-siècle* Paris, enhancing a sense of the lineage of their works, and relating to questions around freedom of expression, or the moral obligation of the artist to speak out against oppression and hypocrisy.

In constructing and performing their respective personae, Meow Meow and Dusty Limits bring formidable research and intellectual rigor to their work, both of them having completed theses on performance and pornography and the castrati respectively. Beyond sharing an artistic practice informed as much by study as by experience, both performers use humour in communicating or challenging ideas about sexuality, but are equally likely to use “straight” numbers to the same effect. This offsets the comic content of their shows and reinforces the nature of the show as a form of consciousness-raising for the audience.

¹ Huge thanks must go to Meow Meow (and her stalker, Melissa Madden Gray), and to Dusty Limits for agreeing to speak with me. The instances where they are quoted are taken from interviews I have held with Meow and Dusty between 2010 and 2016: interview with Dusty Limits, London, 3 May 2016; interview with Meow Meow, Edinburgh, 24 August 2010; interview with Meow Meow, Sydney, 22 January 2012.

Dusty Limits: making light of the darkness

Dusty shines light on darkness and draws attention to hypocrisy through application of theories that he argues are related to Lacan and the mirror. He draws on taboo topics and takes the stigma out of them, sometimes by simply addressing them, and sometimes by combining humour in his discussion of ideas or attitudes. He also uses humour to engage with problematic subjects as a coping mechanism, which has generally received a positive response from audience members (Limits 2016).² For Dusty, another important aspect of addressing issues, regardless of whether they are problematic, taboo or unpleasant, since he subscribes to the Lacanian notion that to repress any aspect of the Self is not without consequences, such as causing what is repressed to later reappear elsewhere. Furthermore, he has made light of his own interest in Lacanian theory, making self-deprecating jokes about the value of an Arts degree and of the comic potential of understanding psychoanalysis (Limits 2015; Limits 2016).

Dusty's use of contestive humour primarily aims to send up and challenge attitudes towards issues rather than the issues themselves, a key difference that is potentially lost on some audiences. Ironically, he places no limits on what is said or addressed, but is mindful of finely-tuned delivery and context being imperative to the success of a number. His experiences shape his *oeuvre*, and lend gravitas to his work, though elements of hyperbole and embellishment to comic effect are never far away.

Dusty's gifts as a lyricist, by his own admission, are focused primarily on four things: wine, death, himself, and monkeys (Limits 2015). Another prominent feature of his songs is sex and sexuality, sometimes as a topic interwoven with the aforementioned subject matter – with the exception of monkeys – and with the added inclusion of mental health issues (partly inspired by Dusty's own experiences of depression and self-harm). As well as combining a discussion of sexuality alongside these issues, it is also addressed alongside broader concerns as part of a critique of illogical politics (be it left or right), or as the focus, often with tongue firmly in cheek, such as in the songs *Why Me, God?* and *MSM*. The former is a comic lament of the singer's moribund sex life, and *MSM* is a tongue-in-cheek critique of sexual hypocrisy; or indeed of the pressures that drive such hypocrisy. The song derives its name from an anagram that Limits acknowledges may not be widely known beyond sexologist circles, referring to men who have sex with men, focusing on the practice rather than the sexual identification of the participants. Limits' material has evolved gradually to become darker and more exploratory; subjects addressed are also a means of bringing things to light – “making light of the darkness,” to use his description. He also describes his shows as “sit-down misery” as a reaction against the ubiquity of stand-up comedy. The sexual content of his shows is borne from what he sees as a need to be honest about the fact (or facts) of sex, rather than perpetuate the immaturity and prudery that he often encounters. By confronting issues and speaking frankly about them, Dusty aims to normalise conversations about sexuality, without stigma, shame or awkwardness; by combining humour, personal narratives and humour (primarily through lyrics rather than physicality, as is more prevalent in Meow Meow's act), he

² He explained to me that he has spoken with audience members after shows who have praised his songs dealing with self-harm and suicide ideation who have engaged in the same behaviours and appreciated the use of humour to address them (Limits 2016).

embodies what he aims to instil in audiences, and encourage open, sensible discussion at an individual or personal and a broader community or global level.

Dusty Limits harbours no illusions as to the effectiveness or profoundness of his art as far as its transformative power is concerned. He refers to Peter Cook's famously ironic praise of the Berlin cabaret scene of the 1920s and 1930s that "did so much to stop the rise of Hitler and prevent the outbreak of the Second World War," and has also joked about the limited sphere of influence specific to his own work. Dusty quips about "cabaret that only dogs can hear," and satirises the limited appeal of some of his material as well as the possibly exclusive nature of the content of his act. When performing at the launch of his album, *Grin*, he described himself as "put[ting] the 'cis' into 'sissy,'" before thanking the four people in the audience who understood and appreciated the reference (Limits 2015).

Like Dusty, Meow has also used humour when addressing the nature of her art to begin with, and employed contestive humour to both jokingly question its power to transform or effect change, in keeping with Limit's reference to Peter Cook. This is reaffirmed by Meow Meow's reassurance "Don't worry, darling, it's just theatre – it doesn't *mean* anything!" (Ghomeshi 2011). That said, Meow uses as her starting point the transformative, the iconic and the emotionally-charged within her work. Dusty Limits, however, is quite blatant in the awareness of just how far his sphere of influence extends as an artist. He questions the effectiveness of cabaret as a didactic medium, despite his own appreciation for *kleinkunst* as part of a narrative framework to share ideas with the audience.

The integral part of Dusty Limits' material and its humorous content is how good the joke is, rather than the subject of the joke itself.³ He is always mindful never to "punch down" when making a joke, however this can at first glance appear ambiguous to some audience members. One example is *(Don't) Help the Aged*, which bears comparison with Friedrich Hollaender's *An allem sind die Juden schuld! (It's all the Jews' fault!)*. This song also demonstrates Limits' tendency to satirise attitudes rather than issues, groups or situations *per se*. Here, the use of hyperbolic humour challenges risible ideas by extending them further, asking the question of whether cutting resources for the aged should be applied equally to the homeless or the sick, just as Hollaender's lyrics blame the Jewish community for changes in the weather, dated jokes on the radio, taxation, and illness.⁴

Limits has said that there is nothing he would not joke about or deal with in a song, but he stresses that the delivery and the nature of the joke is key. There is one instance where a song has been "retired" because he felt that it gave the wrong impression as to who was the butt of the joke (*I Hope Your Children Die of Cancer*, based on a retort by Hugh Grant to a paparazzo and satirising Grant's reaction), though generally speaking his songs are selected in a much less carefully curated way to

³ The notion of rehearsal and humour can be brought to bear here as well. Some of Dusty's best jokes have been ad libs; some he has remembered and incorporated into his act, others he wishes he remembered so that he could do the same, but always with the same focus on the quality of the joke, and care to make the target clear.

⁴ Limits describes his song as also satirising the left-right divide in politics, which he argues no longer exists. He sings in the style of Noël Coward to heighten its comic potential, and, in his words, "that makes it all OK," delivering "a sensible policy for a happier Britain." The solutions offered in the lyrics continue the hyperbole and absurd dark humour, such as suggesting that the elderly be melted into glue (Limits 2015).

Meow Meow. Equally, he recognises that some content acts as a trigger. Even this has become part of his act; he offers a comic disclaimer at the beginning of his show, and in his patter between numbers explains some of the song's background. Dusty also is "happy to amuse [him]self," and writes jokes that he finds funny. If the audience finds them funny as well, then he considers their reaction to be a bonus (Limits 2016).

Dusty and Meow also frequently make their own sexuality the butt of their jokes, in terms of their proclivities and past exploits, creating comically mythicised personae.⁵ This is in contrast to performers like Penny Arcade or Adrienne Truscott, who challenge taboos around sexuality but more aggressively (Truscott has performed wearing nothing but a jacket and wig in a show based entirely around deconstructing rape jokes, calling attention to and contesting the notion of "asking for it" in her show by the same name; Arcade uses monologues and blunt language in shows like *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* to question notions of shame, identity and reclamation of vices as virtues).

As far as challenging perceptions of sex, by joking Meow and Dusty seek to normalise it, but also defuse anxiety by making light of the subject matter. In Meow's case this augments her satire of the diva (further stripping away the glamorous image), while simultaneously playing with the image of the diva as sex symbol.⁶ Dusty's use of humour in relation to his own sex life or lack thereof is part of his oscillation between narcissism and neediness but has on occasion served a purpose in defusing tension and simultaneously critiquing what has been recently termed "toxic masculinity" in the media. When confronted with hecklers, he has replied with "shut up and kiss me," which has the effect of disorienting the heckler and adding a playfully bawdy aspect to the show for the benefit of the audience. This also draws attention to sexually-charged heckling of female performers, or women more generally, and follows Dusty's determination to call out hypocrisy at any available chance, particularly about sex. This is motivated by the hyperbole around sex in the UK that has "created such misery," and additionally connects to the "cognitive deficit" implicit in objectification from Dusty's standpoint. Dusty has questioned the use of the word "objectification" and suggests, not incorrectly, that it is overused and not always fully understood by people using it. He argues that "objectification" has become a problematic catch-all that gives the impression of appreciating beauty versus solely reducing a person to beauty alone, or beautiful parts, something he believes is absurd (Limits 2016).⁷

The hypocrisy surrounding sexuality is one of the main things to come under fire from Dusty, exemplified by *Dear Mr Cardinal* and *MSM* (jokingly referred to by Dusty and Michael Roulston as "the walkout song," since in every performance, indignant audience members have left – often men with their wives). In this piece, men who have sex with men, whether they identify as queer or not, is not the issue, but the

⁵ Dusty, for instance, makes references to a possible past in pornography (saying "I didn't need the money, I did it because it was fun"), and later jokes about the horror for audiences if he were to be seen naked. Conversely, Meow refers to enforced audience participation in her shows as "speed dating," and when she touches spectators or commands that they touch her, or one another, that their justification should their partners ask is "she made me explore myself."

⁶ She adds that she is "the butt of [her own] joke... and the bosom" (Baum 2012).

⁷ He uses the analogy of a car being reduced to its component parts, like stylish hubcaps, and argues to assume the same perception across an audience is to misjudge them. That having been said, he has added, with tongue half-in-cheek, that the day someone doesn't compliment him on his posterior, he will stop performing (Limits 2016).

hypocrisy of sneaking out on one's girlfriend is – or, in the case of former Cardinal Keith O'Brien, fulminating against homosexuality but later being found to have a male partner. This song was actually written and performed for one show, and a year later had to be rewritten when O'Brien's situation came to light. The refrain for *MSM* involves the audience singing along with Dusty for the refrain, while divided down the middle, representing straight and gay, creating a sort of call-and-response chorus (consisting of the word “cock”). This bluntness confronts and breaks down the issue to its most basic element, without discussion of taxonomy or deeper issues, but does so to comic effect. In *Dear Mr Cardinal*, Dusty criticises the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church “and their ill-informed, cunt opinions” and its effect on the mental and physical health of the queer community in particular, with the line “ideas like yours put queers in A&E, Mr Cardinal.” Again, this shows the specifics of Dusty's songs in addressing an individual, and the potentially fatal consequences of his public stance on issues like homosexuality. Dusty's use of strong language is comic on one hand, but on the other it functions as challenge to the audience, perhaps comparable to Tim Minchin's *The Pope Song*. Minchin dares the audience's outrage, and suggests that one should be more offended by the corruption within the Church that is described in the lyrics, than by the “offensive” language of the lyrics themselves (since the word “fuck,” or variations of it, appear over 80 times in the song), challenging double standards of what is perceived as offensive and worthy of censure (Anonymous 2011, 3–5).

This satire of sexual repression and expression, particularly concerning queer sexuality, also feeds into broader trends within society of things like the use of “#nohomo” (in social media and slang), and what Dusty describes as “hetsplaining” – the prevalence of heterosexuals defining the terms or incidence of non-heterosexual discrimination. Limits is not especially critical of heteronormativity but by the same token will sing songs with male pronouns given that he identifies as gay and so will make choices fuelled by an experiential element of his performance (Limits 2016).⁸ This too can carry contestive overtones in its openness, and the challenge lies in the normalcy of Limits' choice of lyric pronouns.

Through the use of dark satire, Dusty Limits' performance serves as a form of consciousness-raising with the deliberate aim of making the audience feel uncomfortable. By confronting his audience with awkward questions that require answers, he seeks to be “brutal” and “knock people out of their stupor fuelled by crappy TV,” albeit through the use of humour, be it at his own expense or by lampooning double standards, cultural incompetence or political skulduggery (Limits 2016).

Meow Meow: “Fabulously Taking the Piss”

At the core of Meow's performance practice is a sex-positive approach, in keeping with her earlier research around the work of artist and porn performer-turned ecosexual activist Annie Sprinkle and by her understanding of earlier generations of cabaret and burlesque (particularly within the Weimar-era tradition). Meow addresses

⁸ Dusty's songs, however, are not strictly about being gay. He has not performed at Pride events, or similar queer-specific shows. His choice of using male pronouns is in his words not a political statement, it is “technically just [being] honest as an artist”. This highlights an essential truth about Dusty's oeuvre: for Limits, truth of emotion is more important than the political point to be made through a song. Dusty does also fuse the practical with the political, but without labouring a point or forcing an idea to “fit” within a show. He wears heavy eye makeup which forms part of a “vaguely political gender-fuck statement” but is equally practical for his performance (Limits 2016).

body politics, physicality and sex, with an approach stemming from physical experience to ground theoretical elements brought to bear. She never feels that sexuality is dark; rather, it ought to be a celebration, and her humorous attitude towards sex and sexuality comes from this perspective (Meow 2012). However, she does not shy away from the truth of relationships and their problems, nor does she sugar-coat discussions of rape culture and associated issues.

In terms of her choice of songs, she plays with high and low art, with genre, and style, and this is echoed in the humour threaded through each show (Meow 2012). Meow Meow does not, like Dusty, perform songs that are overtly comic; rather, her comedy lies in her delivery of a song, and the act that unfolds around it. She will frequently crowd-surf (she says that now it has become “expected” of her when she performs), and famously uses the audience as props in her shows – as seats, stands for microphones or music, and as backup dancers.⁹ It can be argued that Meow especially and Dusty to an extent subvert power structures in their use of humour and their choice of materials to bring attention to issues, and this is reinforced by the erosion of traditional physical boundaries between *artiste* and audience, to the comic detriment of the latter.

Like Dusty Limits, Meow Meow draws attention to issues and makes attempts at consciousness-raising. Also like Limits to an extent, she embodies and continues the practice of *riso con rabbia*, a “guiding principle” of the work of Dario Fo and Franca Rame: when the laughter of the audience subsides, they are left with anger, and this anger is intended to be the motivation that will drive change for the better after the show has ended, and within the world in a broader sense beyond the performance seen (Wood 1995, 93). This complements the incorporation of contestive humour into Meow’s *oeuvre*, which challenges the audience through the content of the show, its delivery, and then the aftermath by physically unsettling them at the same time as addressing issues through song. Fusing humour, satire and anger features prominently in both her and Dusty’s shows as a means of challenging dominant discourses or myths, and prompting the audience to effect change for the better.

Meow Meow has increasingly moved from solo cabaret shows to extant pieces, including Brecht and Weill’s *Dreigroschenoper* (Threepenny Opera; playing Jenny) in 2013, *Die Sieben Todsünden* (*The Seven Deadly Sins*; as Anna) in 2015; and in 2016 appeared as Hippolyta/Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the Globe Theatre in London.¹⁰ Where Dusty has not played queer events, Meow often has, including Manchester’s Queer Up North Festival in 2010 and Melbourne’s Midsumma in 2016, perhaps in keeping with Meow’s own identification as “a fluid kind of girl.” Another

⁹ Meow’s crowd-surfing serves a dual purpose: she forcibly engages the audience, admonishing them to support her and interact without the use of a device or screen – “I’m not a television!” – and she uses her physicality as a form of catharsis, exemplified by occasional performances of a cancan line with audience members and frequently doing the splits, asserting that “the cancan is fucking joyous,” something she seeks to share with audiences.

¹⁰ The exploration of sexual politics in Meow’s shows feed into the wider discussion of sexuality within the play as a whole (also dealt with in some scenes using humour and pastiche). Within Emma Rice’s production, there is a continued discussion of sexuality and gender roles, with the players’ roles gender-flipped (excepting Bottom), along with that of Helena – here Helenus, a “Hoxton hipster” pining for Demetrius, who chooses to remain in the closet in order to advance his career and make an advantageous marriage. Moreover, Titania is depicted in a sequence akin to date-rape committed by Oberon when he administers the potion responsible for the misunderstandings around which the play hinges (Trueman 2016).

key commonality in some of Meow and Dusty's performances is their specificity. Dusty has decried generalities, saying that a song can become "boring in the abstract." He prefers to apply ideas like Grotowski's exercise of holding an imaginary cat and adding details to more realistically create a scenario. In Limits' words, "the more precise, the more powerful," so as to create a performance where the imaginary real is more nuanced and believable for audiences to follow (Limits 2016; Grotowski 1975, 103). Similarly, Meow creates cabaret performances in the sense of songs with stories within them, or focusing on specific issues (Garvey 2012).

Meow Meow addresses universal ideas and themes – love, loss, war, death, and joy among them – but recently has begun to anchor these concepts to a specific context. Examples of this include the Seven Deadly Sins performed in Melbourne in November 2015, and her interpretations of *The Little Match Girl* and *The Little Mermaid*, performing what she describes as "agit-prop fairy tales" (Wilson 2014). In each of these she raises, and challenges, ideas with reference to specific problems, such as consumerism, youth homelessness (particularly the number of children sleeping rough in Australia), and the contemporary quest for love (Meow 2016).¹¹

She describes her act as "fabulously taking the piss," and indeed many of her shows have included a sort of "beautiful decay" that she has found in costumes and in the physicality of the performer as a creature, along with her persona as a satire of the character of the stage diva (Meow 2012). The messed make-up and garments frayed from use have appeared in her shows, and as they degrade she continues to use them, enhancing the vision of the itinerant artiste and alluding to the influence of "old showbiz" on her *oeuvre*, including references to Gypsy Rose Lee, Sarah Bernhardt and Claire Waldoff (Meow 2010). More importantly, Meow's satirical persona ties in with the comic phenomenon of the threadbare or rough-and-tumble Berlin cabaret *chanteuse* acting the lady despite her obvious lack of breeding or means (Jelavich 1993, 104).

Her show *Vamp* was inspired by women who have been variously demonised and praised for unashamed, unconventional or assertive sexuality, including Sarah Bernhardt, Luisa Casati, and Theda Bara (Meow 2010). She couples these women and their earnest performance of sexuality and public personae with a send-up of the cliché of contemporary raunch culture, which highlights the double standard around performance of sexuality but also defuses the appeal and threat through physical humour. Equally, Meow can be argued to position herself within a continuum of iconoclastic women, with her fondness for songs about "forgotten" figures and her reinterpretation of songs by recognisable performers serving as a sort of reclaiming that is in keeping with that argued by Sheila Rowbotham of reclaiming the achievements of "overlooked" women (Rowbotham 1972, 16). Meow's patter draws attention to the issues, while her physicality undercuts the seriousness of the situation.

Meow makes fun of the trope of the predatorily assertive sexual woman, and imbues what she says and does with a nudge-wink-purr sensibility that harks back to music-hall and vaudeville stars like Marie Lloyd or Sophie Tucker alongside women like Marlene Dietrich and Mae West.¹² The link to Mae West is further augmented by

¹¹ In this case the critique of the search for love is combined with a commentary on environmental destruction, and singing in dolphin using vocal "shredding," a technique for which Meow has become famous.

¹² To illustrate the similarity to Marie Lloyd, whose act was heavily reliant on nudge-wink humour and a joking nod to discussion of sexuality, Meow has delivered a jazzy, up-tempo and cabana-style rendition of Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds' "Red Right Hand." In her patter she explained to the audience

the fact that Meow does not take sex itself seriously, and this becomes another part of her satire; she makes fun of the importance placed upon it, and contests dominant views regarding control, sexuality and particularly of gender and sexuality through shows like *Meow Meow's Little Mermaid*. The piece is more about the search for love than sex, and the confusion between the two, or the focus on one over the other in contemporary culture.¹³

When dealing with questions of agency, bodily autonomy and perceptions of one's body, Meow and Dusty operate necessarily from different perspectives. Meow has declared that one can be as empowered as one likes in performing, but ultimately there will always be at least one audience member ogling the performer or reducing her to body parts. As she says, "It took me quite a while to get a grip on the fact that no matter how much you think you're making sense to someone, at the end of the day they're still looking at your boobs" (Scott-Norman 2008). A related concern is the importance of context and humour as much as content itself, and making informed decisions about what is appropriate and where. There is a sense of terror and prudishness that exists with some audiences but not others, and which Meow asserts can be reclaimed and used accordingly to push them, to challenge their prudery by "shock[ing] audiences as long as they're shockable," echoing the practice of David Friedman (Meow 2010). Throughout her shows, she is conscious of using her physicality for more than simply physical comedy. While this may suffice in America, where there is still a degree of what Meow terms "terror of the breast" (prompting her to use them all the more to highlight the ridiculousness of the situation), Berliner audiences are more likely to expect substance beyond slapstick, and ask "You have a bosom out, but what are you actually saying?" (Baum 2012). Here, one can see how Meow performs her persona and her sexuality as an extension of her exploration and embodiment of the "fleshiness of life" (Meow 2012).¹⁴

Meow Meow challenges ideas regarding the gaze and the engagement of the audience and uses humour to deliver a serious message (wrapped in a crazy, glamorous package). In this way she uses humour to encourage irreverence alongside a call to vigilance against hypocrisy (Butler, Hoedemaekers and Stoyanova Russell 2015, 499). By linking herself to the tradition of burlesque along with cabaret, she effectively performs a burlesque of burlesque, and the ideas around it through her parody of the diva and the sex symbol or sexual woman on display through performance.¹⁵ Her

that it is actually "quite an educational song." Much of her patter and reliance on delivery of songs for mining comic potential aligns her more strongly with muses and antecedents in an explicit and stylistic sense. (Meow 2014).

¹³ Here we see a similarity to Mae West in her making light of sex and its primacy. Where there was often a tension in depiction or discussion of sex and sexuality, West's attitude was more akin to joking about the very fact that so many people placed such importance on sex (see Visconti 2014, 95-107).

¹⁴ Within this exploration there is also a pantomime element, seen in *Apocalypse Meow*. As she moves among the audience, stealing scarves, handbags, and a boyfriend from among them, for use as props while singing torch songs like *What was sent to the soldier's wife* and *Mon homme marié*, melding comic behaviour with gloomy lyrics.

¹⁵ This is reinforced by her creation of a "foreign" persona, and performing character, which she says has allowed her greater leeway when interacting with audiences by virtue of her alterity. Being in character, in Dusty Limits' words, also means that one is "allowed to be silly and fall down," but fits neatly with the work of cabaret as a form. Dusty suggests that the combination of "booze, cheap production values and sense of liminal space" (the latter being of crucial importance) lend themselves to the creation of a safe space, at the very least in terms of discussion of ideas that are not openly dealt

shows preserve older performance traditions full of sensuality and physicality, but are given a postmodern twist by fusing the image of the conventional cabaret singer with its deconstruction (Jelavich 1993, 28, 102).

Conclusion

Ultimately, both Meow and Dusty are aware of the disparity between the potential for their art to effect lasting change, and whether that potential is realised. With that in mind, Meow suggests that cabaret offers some “balm” and agitates for change without being unrealistic about expectations (Garvey 2012). This also means that both refuse to take their art too seriously, with Meow saying “it’s performance, it’s not world politics” (Baum 2012). By the same token, they recognise the purpose served by cabaret for sharing ideas and serving as a coping mechanism or form of release, with or without the additional use of humour in the lyrics or delivery of songs. Dusty speaks of cabaret as the perfect site for discussion of taboo ideas and frank discourse of thorny issues (be they intensely personal, or political, or both).

He says that cabaret offers the “wonderful grey area” of the “imaginary real” where “no-one’s hurt but loins may be stirred,” just as in Meow’s shows “you may not be moved but you will be touched” (Limits 2016, Lawes 2009). It is the aim of Dusty Limits and Meow Meow, then, to stir not just the loins but the minds of their audiences, particularly in regard to attitudes towards sexuality, and to open up frank discussion. This is in keeping with Simon Critchley’s assertion that humour can not only highlight the follies of society, but calls on the audience to face and change what they see for the better (Critchley 2002, 17-18). However, Meow and Dusty also show that this discussion need not, and indeed should not, be a wholly serious exercise, and that humour can be a valuable tool in facilitating communication, particularly around sensitive issues.

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with such as sexual abuse, sexual repression or prejudice based on one’s sexuality, mental illness, and self-harm.

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