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## HIV/AIDS, Harm Reduction, and Neoliberal Containment Strategies in Contemporary UK Documentary Theatre

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*Using Peter Darney's play 5 Guys Chillin' as a case study, this essay explores how documentary theatre may operate as a distinctly neoliberal public health measure when it comes to reducing the risk of HIV transmission related to subcultural practices such as chemsex. The subject of countless sensationalist and tacitly homophobic headlines in recent years, chemsex has generated a kind of moral panic around gay subcultures in recent years. Although Darney has described the play as an attempt to tackle such demonisation, 5GC inadvertently ends up restating pathologizing narratives surrounding chemsex via what Roger Foster has termed an 'ethic of authenticity': the notion that one can reach happiness by adapting to normative ways of living and neoliberal health diktats. Combining Foster's critique of neoliberal therapeutic culture and the fiction of "wellness" with Herbert Marcuse's theories surrounding so-called 'one-dimensional society', this essay seeks to explain how 5GC paradoxically perpetrates its ethos of anti-prejudice by pathologizing interview subjects as victims of a subculture intent on rejecting its own societal oppression.*

At first glance, Peter Darney's documentary play *5 Guys Chillin'* (2016) appears to offer audiences a vital and socially progressive corrective to prejudicial mainstream narratives surrounding chemsex, a subcultural practice generally undertaken by gay and bisexual men involving group sex and the use of illegal substances (most notably crystal meth). The discovery of chemsex by some of the UK's mainstream media outlets triggered a kind of moral panic around the mid-2010s thanks to concerns surrounding the relatively high prevalence of HIV amongst men who have sex with men and the health risks associated with certain substances. Despite there being no clear evidence that the practice had contributed to increased rates of HIV transmission outlets including *Vice Media*, *BBC News*, the *Guardian*, and the *Evening Standard* were quick to assert this unfounded link following the release of a sensationalist documentary film entitled *Chemsex* in 2015 (Hakim), with the *Observer* branding the subculture a "Horror Story" haunted by the prospect of disease (Flynn). Flimsy "scientific" discourse and familiar homophobic tropes have invariably accompanied this media coverage, with common themes emerging that suggest

most, if not all, gay men's engagement with chemsex is a form of self-harm rooted in internalised homophobia and the resulting inability to form meaningful relationships with other gay men. That chemsex frequently leads to physical and mental health issues and sometimes death. That chemsex is

linked to the recent increase in HIV transmission in the UK and therefore poses a public health crisis. (Hakim)

Apparently recognising the need for a queer perspective on the topic and a corrective to the demonisation of chemsex participants, therefore, Darney wrote *5GC* intending to create a measured, ostensibly judgement-free intervention. Based on the verbatim testimony of chemsex participants, the play tells a fictional story of a single chemsex party (or “chill-out”, to use the parlance of the subculture). Its characters speak frankly of their experience of the chemsex scene, swapping stories and offering each other words of advice in a way that, as detected by David Stuart in a foreword to the published text of the play, recognises the subculture and its attendant risks as “a community issue, one that will require compassion, unity, and the setting aside of our judgments and unkindness” (14).

The impulse to construct counternarratives to mainstream media headlines has commonly been cited as a motivating factor in the creation of documentary theatre in the UK. Popular examples include Robin Soans’ *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), which sought to uncover the reasons behind why people commit terrorist atrocities via the verbatim testimony of perpetrators and, therefore, better address the so-called “war on terror.” Soans’ play, like others of its time, is the product of a political environment characterised by degradation of public faith in the integrity of institutions traditionally upheld as authoritative purveyors of truth, such as public service broadcasters. Locating the origins of this trend around the turn of the millennium, Daniel Schulze explains,

in the political environment of the first decade of the millennium, it seems that spectators and audiences felt they were not being told the truth by public institutions. Theatre, for some, effectively took over the role of journalism, purporting to show the real truth behind the official story. (193)

Whilst this conception of documentary theatre as a uniquely dependable form of knowledge has clearly proved compelling, scholars have been quick to point out the folly in uncritically accepting its truth-telling function. As Stephen Bottoms notes, the apparent realism of the verbatim form “purports to present a transparent representation of ‘lifelike’ behaviour, while in fact providing a constructed authorial perspective on the real,” which conflates editorial creativity with incontrovertible authority over truth (59). The very structure of *Talking to Terrorists*, for example, in which a psychologist provides running analysis and diagnoses for its interviewees, betrays Soans’ desire to “other” and pathologise his subjects from the outset.

The psychologist's "'insights' function to circumvent any need for actual comprehension of the possible motives behind political violence: we are assured that terrorists are simply dysfunctional unfortunates more to be pitied than feared" (Bottoms 58). By essentialising terrorists as somehow "broken" or "damaged" anomalies in this way, the play delegitimises the complex political grievances that may have contributed to their violent actions: they become exemplars of the human capacity for evil whilst the state remains its innocent victim.

Rather than offering up a counterhegemonic narrative that questions prevailing power structures, Soans' play rigidifies their dominance and reveals how the documentary form remains acutely vulnerable to editorial bias and normative modes of thinking. Detecting similar strands of hegemonic judgement in Darney's play, despite well-meaning intentions to undermine the demonisation of chemsex participants, this essay argues that *5GC* advocates for a distinctly neoliberal form of harm reduction. I broadly employ the notion of neoliberalism as a heuristic to describe capitalism's contemporary conjuncture of extreme individualism that has produced "a world where competition is the primary virtue, and solidarity a sign of weakness," mediating the political and legislative sphere in such a way as to render socialist theories of governance seemingly irrational or pathological (Mirowski 92). This definition helps to articulate how the play entrenches its subjects in a homonormative culture apotheosising self-reliance, monogamy, and "healthy" lifestyle habits. Grounded in the neoliberal fiction that robust health and "wellbeing" represent the road to living as one's "authentic self", *5GC* paradoxically perpetrates its ethic of anti-prejudice by pathologizing interview subjects as victims of a subculture intent on rejecting its own societal oppression and preventing participants from living a fulfilled life as their "true selves." As will become clear, my critique is primarily informed by Roger Foster's analysis of therapeutic discourse as a tool of tacit domination under neoliberalism and his expansion of Herbert Marcuse's notion of "one-dimensional thought." In brief, one-dimensionality signifies the widespread acquiescence to certain ways of living under capitalism, supported by the fiction that material comforts and a prescriptive (necessarily heteronormative) version of happiness are liberatory, desirable and morally sound. Although Darney's play *attempts* to engage in what Marcuse terms "negative thinking" (13) – one-dimensional culture's critical antithesis (or remedy, perhaps) – its use of the documentary theatre form ends up promoting a therapeutic public health and containment strategy that reaffirms many of the conservative, anti-liberatory messages peddled by the mainstream media it claims to deride.

One of the first signs that Darney's editorial powers implicate his play as a tool of neoliberal power relations is that he anonymises his subjects, who are referred to only as J, M, B, R, and PJ. Whilst this decision shows necessary deference to the ethical sensitivities bound up with using subjects' word-for-word experiences, vulnerable as they are to misrepresentation, it also provides Darney with a considerable amount of leeway to imbue the play with tacit ideological messages. Thanks to the considerable degree of artistic license required to depict a party that never actually took place, it is virtually impossible to tell which parts of the text have been lifted verbatim and which are imagined. Thus, Darney is to some extent freed from the responsibility of fashioning characters faithful to the personalities and temperaments of the people on whom they are based, allowing him to pass off as fact moralistic speculations surrounding the ways in which chemsex culture negatively affects the lives of participants. If there were any doubt as to the editorialization of *5GC*, however, the paratextual elements of its playtext should be proof enough. Although the "Author's Note" stresses the importance of respecting the "choice" and "free will" of those who partake in chemsex, Darney also cites his inspiration for writing the play as a fascination with the "buried sadness" he supposedly detected in a subject named J, as well as J's "need for someone special to connect to" and his "nihilistic tendencies" (1). Of course, the idea of "buried" sadness is necessarily speculative in this context, indicating that Darney predetermined the story he had hoped to disinter before conducting research for the play. Although Stuart argues that "[b]ringing ChemSex to the stage...not only raises awareness of this difficult cultural phenomenon, but provides a safe space for the issues to be presented, explored, humanised; extricated from the scandal-mongering headlines that alarm and stigmatise the issue" (13), the affective language Darney employs suggests that the play is more ideologically coercive than Stuart grasps. Whilst *5GC*'s subjects are not demonised in the same way as chemsex participants are in many mainstream media outlets, they are, as will be explored, figured as "victims" in such a way that sensationalises chemsex subculture, encouraging the audience to view it as a strictly harmful practice and justifying its stigmatisation. Perhaps most tellingly, the "Author's Note" also explains how

J came to see *5 Guys Chillin'* at the King's Head in its last run. He had been clean for forty-three days. I massively regret letting him come. The stress of being faced with that part of his life, in the company of his old chill mates, wasn't something he was ready for, and he relapsed. (Darney 8)

The use of the word “letting” here suggests dominion over J and betrays an imagined managerial relationship with the subject. From the outset, therefore, it is clear that Darney claims a monopoly over “truth” in a similar way to Soans in *Talking to Terrorists*. He adopts a paternalistic role, condemning chemsex and dictating what he believes is best for those who participate. Furthermore, in subordinating J and asserting that his “ability to choose with free will had gone,” Darney declares, rather simplistically, that J faces a dichotomous choice between possessing the “free will” to live “authentically” or to relinquish all free will to the culture of chemsex (20). Such binary language exemplifies the neoliberal fashioning of self-management and responsibility as the “common sense” of a society in which, as Roger Foster argues, the narrative of authenticity has collapsed “into a therapeutic narrative of instrumental self-management” (111).

In “Therapeutic Culture, Authenticity, and Neoliberalism”, Foster argues that “authenticity has been pressed into the service of rendering meaningful and helping to buttress distinctively neoliberal notions of personal responsibility and citizenship. Authenticity has effectively collapsed into the form of self-managed therapeutic freedom” (101). Foster’s ideas are enlightening in the context of this study as they adapt Marcusean notions surrounding scientism and technological rationality, rendering them legible within a neoliberal context by analysing the ways in which contemporary therapeutic disciplines such as psychology coerce people to understand individual autonomy in paradoxically oppressive instrumental terms. Conceived during the increasingly consumerist 1960s, *One-Dimensional Man* argued that the perceived improvements in living standards brought about by advanced industrial capitalism obfuscated social relations that would constitute class struggle in a classically Marxian sense. Just as contemporary, seemingly objective psychological maxims of authenticity and “wellness” smother the counterhegemonic potential of neoliberal subjects, the consumerist advertising and mass media of Marcuse’s era ensured industrial capitalism remained hegemonic via teleological narratives:

Within the vast hierarchy of executive and managerial boards extending far beyond the individual establishment into scientific laboratory and research institute, the national government and national purpose, the tangible source of exploitation disappears behind the façade of objective rationality. Hatred and frustration are deprived of their specific target, and the technological veil conceals the reproduction of inequality and enslavement. (Marcuse 35)

Foster argues that such forms of control have only intensified and broadened to new areas in a neoliberal context. Despite the fact that the twenty-first century has witnessed increasing social inequalities and disunity thanks to the financialisation of the economy and other neoliberal phenomena, this clear incongruity within liberal democratic narratives of progress has found a resolution in the popularisation of individualised psychotherapy and self-help methodologies. As such, governments have been allowed to enact oppressive and immiserating policies on their citizenries with relatively little backlash. As Foster explains,

it is the role of professional expertise, particularly in what [Nikolas Rose] calls the ‘psy’ disciplines, such as psychology and psychiatry, that is central to the story of how this transformation in the role of government has taken place. Since liberal conceptions of government generally forbid the direct action of the state upon individual life-plans and choices, government must act in an indirect manner upon the wishes, desires and values of subjects. (105)

Contemporary therapeutic culture, which places considerable value on the so-called “psy” disciplines and encourages the discovery of an essential, authentic self, thus provides “individuals with the linguistic and cultural resources to make sense of their lives as the result of a series of choices, thus making individual lives amenable to new forms of intervention and management” (106). Decisions and actions that lie outside of this model – which Foster terms the “ethic of authenticity” – are, therefore, figured as deviant, immoral or pathological.

In many ways, the men depicted in *5GC* are shown to fail at the requisite self-monitoring required by therapeutic neoliberal governance, subverting or defying it in a way that is figured as harmful and in contravention of civic duty. A scene towards the end of the play is exemplary of such apparent failings, after a light-hearted interchange about sexual exploits is quickly disrupted by dark events. After listening to sexual anecdotes from PJ, M and R about sleeping with colleagues, having sex while listening to the soundtracks of children’s films and enjoying the feeling of “loads...squirting out of ass cheeks as you’re walking down the road,” B explains:

B: (They laugh.) Yeh! I’ve, I’ve left the Hoist before now with an ass full of cum. And it’s been leaking out while I’ve been walking home...I’ve been collecting it and eating it as I’ve been walking down the street! It must look so wrong. But I’m a cum addict...

*Movement transition: R changes the music. Goddess by Chrome Spark. It moves to lust/sex. Just as M is about to fuck PJ, he G's out. They turn the music off - lighting snaps with it to a colder/bluer state. PJ's screams/fit continues for a moment in the stark silence as they hold him down. They put him in the recovery position, and he spends the rest of the play unconscious in the space. The mood is now darker/pensive/reflective. It's that moment when everyone has realised they should have got their Uber home an hour ago and they are too fucked to leave. (Darney 48)*

B's anecdote is the last in a series of humorous tales of increasingly illicit acts. Up to this point, the stories have not been imbued with any particularly moralistic messages, despite their traditionally abject nature. Indeed, the comic one-upmanship that appears to drive the interchange, with the men competing to offer as subversive anecdotes as possible, could be seen as a way to teasingly scandalise and provoke audience members who are not *au fait* with the subculture, and to test the extent to which they accept the sexual freedoms Darney initially posits in his "Author's Note". However, the jarring shift in tone during the "movement transition" casts a new meaning over the exchange and, indeed, everything that came before it. PJ "G's out", effectively overdosing on GHB, an industrial solvent often used recreationally during chemsex parties to generate feelings of confidence, sexual arousal and euphoria. PJ's reaction to the drug appears to jolt the atmosphere of the party from something ecstatic and upbeat to something much more sinister, a shift reflected in the lighting and effects set out in the stage directions. By cutting out the music and bathing the stage in a cold, blue light, PJ's overdose is signified as a disruptive spectacle; a new phase in the evening's trajectory. In this way, the audience is encouraged to re-evaluate and question everything that occurred in the run-up to the event. PJ's loss of somatic control, for example, is emblematic of his inability to fulfil the imperative of responsibility for the self. He moves from a good-humoured, active member of the group to one whose mental stability and even dignity are scrutinised.

Certainly, the semiotics of PJ's body lying prostrate in the recovery position for the rest of the play operate as a constant reminder of the physical risks that inhere within certain chemsex practices and preclude any possibility of the party returning to its formerly spirited atmosphere. On the stage, an unmoving body could just as plausibly represent a dead person as an unconscious one, and the fact that the conscious men continue talking amongst themselves while ignoring PJ's body, with B and J even having sex next to PJ before the play ends, depicts a culture of pathological self-interest and anti-communitarianism that, if we recall

the fictionalised nature of these events, contradicts Darney's claims towards journalistic neutrality. Rather than offering an alternative to mainstream narratives surrounding chemsex subculture, this scene compounds some of the widely disseminated criticisms commonly directed at its participants. If the overdose scene were not sensationalist enough to scandalise an audience attuned to recent discussions surrounding chemsex, the play's final stage directions may well be:

*B and J have sex on the floor next to unconscious PJ. R does a line. Smokes. Cries. He has not noticed the line of blood from his nose. Music swells. House-lights up - no curtain call. The party keeps going till the house is clear. The sense is that it will go on for days. (Darney 54-5)*

*5GC* culminates in an atmosphere of chaos, with R's bloody nose reminding the audience of the seropositivity of his blood and the "destructive" habits that may have contributed towards his HIV status. These few lines of the playtext alone tell us more about the moralistic messaging behind Darney's play than the "Author's Note" or David Stuart's foreword. The idea that the party will go on for days reinforces the idea that chemsex traps men in a cycle of self-destruction and plunders their so-called "free will". While I am wary of underplaying some of the well-documented and life-altering problems that chemsex can cause for its participants, it is safe to assert that the sensationalism of *5GC* contradicts claims towards measured, panic-free discourse. If the play were to sincerely craft an "authentic" portrayal of chemsex subculture, it would surely pay heed to some of the communitarian aspects that go beyond societal problems caused by individualistic pleasure-seeking. Writing about the intimate and troubled relationship between chemsex and HIV transmission, for example, Kane Race notes that

A gay analysis of chemsex might prompt a further, productive confrontation with one of the central paradoxes of HIV prevention: many of the sites that epidemiologists identify as pathogenic are also key sites for the elaboration of significant social relationships and bonds. In these spaces, participants may be undertaking some of the affective groundwork that generates new possibilities of care, connection, relationality and transformation. Which may not be such a bad thing, especially if ways are found to make these situated experiments safer. (134)

Certainly, Darney's characters demonstrate little of this type of bonding. While partners B and R (who are involved in a three-person relationship) are affectionate towards each other throughout the play, comforting each other when faced with painful memories, any mention or performance of sexual acts that deviate from the tenets of traditional monogamy (or at least long-term commitment) serve only to disrupt this affective attachment. R in particular is figured as a victim of his partner's sexual brio and fervour, expressing a strong preference for the "more intimate side of a relationship, like hugging and cuddling. The most fun about our relationship is when the three of us are lying in bed, watching a DVD. That's better than having twenty guys come and fuck around!" (Darney 54). In this brief penultimate line of *5GC*, its moralistic messaging is made clear: meaningful human connection may only be found within the confines of a (mostly) sexually exclusive union. Other forms of sexual connection represent a failure of self-control or discipline and are invariably haunted by the negative prospects of HIV infection, drug dependency, overdose, and jealousy. It is in this way that the play reflects what Marcuse, building on a Freudian view of sublimation, conceives as one-dimensional society's tendency to steer erotic instinctual energies into socially controlled modes of thought:

Just as this society tends to reduce, and even absorb opposition [...] in the realm of politics and higher culture, so it does in the instinctual sphere. The result is the atrophy of the mental organs for grasping the contradictions and alternatives and, in the one remaining dimension of technological rationality, the *Happy Consciousness* comes to prevail. (82)

While Darney figures *5GC* as offering an alternative narrative to that popularised by the mainstream media, therefore, its focus on preserving a socially prized *Happy Consciousness* through a sexual schema in control of errant, destructive drives merely reinforces restrictive one-dimensionality.

Having established the journalistic angle that runs throughout *5GC*, then, I return to the ways in which its sensationalist edge is undergirded by the therapeutic culture Foster links to neoliberal ideology. The distinctly therapeutic tone evident within much of the discourse preceding PJ's overdose is strongly indicative of a play that sanctions an 'ethic of authenticity', emulating the discourse of group therapy. The men share their thoughts, experiences and secrets surrounding their chemsex habits, opening up an opportunity for other characters to offer relevant thoughts and advice. Take, for example, a scene in which the men discuss issues surrounding sexual health after J tells them how he became HIV positive:

PJ: My wife's six months pregnant. (Group is stunned.) Scary. But I think being a parent saved my life in many ways... You know, I used to risk my life a lot. With unprotected sex. And I think - it made me love myself more. Changed the focus. Made me less selfish.

R: I'm HIV positive too. I would not have bareback sex with a guy who said to me he was negative. If he turned round and said to me I'm negative, but I want to have sex bareback, I wouldn't believe him he could've had a test, what twelve weeks ago? And then caught HIV within that time, you know what I mean? So! When we play we play with other HIV guys.

B: I'll play with negative guys!

R: Errrrr!

J: You do have a responsibility to make sure that everybody else is safe.  
(Darney 43)

On one level, this passage demonstrates the subjects' adherence to (or at least acknowledgement of) safe sex practices designed to protect fellow participants in chemsex subculture, with the confessional mode serving as a measure of the "authenticity" of their commitment to communitarian harm reduction. However, pay close attention to the linguistic construction of the characters' divulgements, and it becomes clear that a neoliberal social order shapes the experiences of these men. The self-referential nature of their discourse (they speak of others but only in relation to themselves) is illustrative of a distinctly neoliberal form of authenticity which "rather than representing a tension between society and the individual [...] now works to foster social cohesion through its normalizing of the notions of individual responsibility and self-reliance" (Foster 108). J's assertion that a generalised "you" has a responsibility towards "everybody else", for example, is indicative of neoliberalism's ideological imperative to outsource or privatise health and social care into the hands of individuals. The problematic aspects of drug use as dangerous to physical and mental health are not the concern of state institutions and wider society but must be handled by the men alone. This individualistic messaging is also consistent with a self-serving dialectic allowing men such as PJ to conceptualise procreation with his wife as a path towards self-betterment or "self-love" (despite earlier confessing that he married to please his parents and extended family). As Foster explains, the contemporary neoliberal conception of authenticity is supported by self-help discourse embodying "a therapeutic ethos that hides real economic and social failure and

disappointment behind a projected fantasy of individual self-reliance through careful emotional management” (111). The ideal of self-reliance promulgated by *5GC*, then, refuses to place any responsibility for the safety of chemsex participants onto public institutions, thereby upholding neoliberal hegemony’s mission to privatise social welfare.

To give *5GC* its political due for a moment, one could argue that the play critically interrogates PJ’s self-betterment fantasy as an indictment of societal homophobia. His engagement with a practice that leaves him unconscious on a stranger’s floor could easily be read as a destructive coping mechanism for dealing with life in a legally binding heterosexual union, for example. However, the therapeutic processes and patterns which undergird the men’s revelations are ultimately conceptualised as palliative when it comes to assuaging the “buried sadness” Darney identifies in *J* and, by extension, the other party-goers. There are clearly identifiable patterns in the play’s oscillation between moments of “authentic” confessional discourse and those in which sexual acts and drug-taking occur: therapeutic revelations are followed by further affective disclosures, hugging and platonic affection, while sexual acts tend to be followed by tension, conflict or, in the case of PJ, a loss of somatic control. In this way, the play can be seen to advocate the kind of robust emotional management facilitated by therapeutic sessions, while drug-taking and sex (the core activities that constitute chemsex and bring the men together in the first place) are figured as antithetical to this aim. While PJ’s revelations may throw up a wide range of ethical issues, other partygoers markedly forgo the opportunity to explore them, choosing (as *R* does in the above passage) to swiftly move on to stories of their own. In doing so, the characters avoid problematising or interrogating PJ’s apparent self-love in such a way that betrays possible capitulation towards something Lee Edelman terms “reproductive futurism”, an unwavering belief in the societal value of the Child in “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (2). PJ’s drive for self-preservation is framed according to his responsibility to stay fit and healthy for his children, while the politics of a heterosexual union he was effectively coerced into go virtually unproblematised. This reproductive futurism is underlined in the final scene, by which time the self-governance PJ strives for is shown to be lacking. Darney’s editorial decision to have PJ – the party’s only father – overdose, for example, draws particular attention to his failures of responsibility and self-control. The apparent indignity of lying prostrate on a gloomy stage serves as a warning against chemsex’s

potential to lure men away from their “authentic selves” and, by extension, fail their loved ones and dependants.

PJ’s responsibility to his offspring and the play’s overriding message surrounding safe sex and individual responsibility are tightly imbricated throughout the play: if the content of *5GC* were not enough to remind audiences of its pedagogical aims, the fact that each audience member at the King’s Head production received a free condom before the show (Hochstrasser) surely makes clear the play’s attachment to neoliberal notions of governance and personal responsibility. The rather one-sided ideological dimensions of Darney’s documentary style did not go unnoticed in the press. Reviewer Paul Cockburn, for example, explains, “for all its fun and darkness, *5 Guys Chillin’* feels like a well-meaning ‘safer sex’ campaign.” Gareth K Vile is similarly conscious of this one-dimensionality:

By the finale, when the darkest confessions emerge, the production has made its point. A generation of men are unable to have stable relationships, are carelessly catching STDs and damaging their bodies through an almost thoughtful desire for drugs and sex. It is as shocking as a government funded advert from the 1980s, with a tombstone casting a shadow over the cheeky, fun-seeking characters.

Vile is unequivocal about the didacticism of the play’s message, and the fact that, for him, *5GC* goes so far as to indict a whole “generation” of men is indicative of the journalistic sensationalism that, in many ways, this study identifies as its primary failing. If writers of documentary theatre are to get anywhere near the realms of truth, ethical representation, or indeed authenticity (with all of the problems and ambiguities these things entail), they must explore the necessarily imperfect nature of the very form they adopt. As Bottoms notes, documentary plays aware of their own constructedness “encourage spectators to think for themselves about the process of representation involved” with portraying reality, and adopt a more critical, multi-dimensional approach to spectatorship (67). Thanks to its reliance on spectacle and one-track claims towards a solution to “fix” the issues surrounding the chemsex scene, *5GC* forecloses such an opportunity. Darney uses the documentary form to achieve a form of authenticity fabricated by neoliberal ideology as a technology of dominance and control. To this extent, *5GC* unveils the ideological traps to which documentary theatre is vulnerable in the contexts of public health and harm reduction strategies thanks to its ability to crush dialectical tensions between hegemonic structures and what Marcuse terms “the critical

power of Reason” (13). The potential for using verbatim testimony to address the harms of chemsex and HIV transmission is foreclosed by the treatment of 5GC’s subjects who have, under the grasp of Darney’s editorial hand and that of the neoliberal state more broadly, been subjected to “the pure form of servitude: to exist as an instrument, as a thing.” (Marcuse 36).

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Dr Louisa Hann is an early career researcher and freelance writer who has just completed a PhD examining contemporary HIV/AIDS theatre at the University of Manchester. Her primary interests include queer theatre and performance art, the political economy of theatre, cultural materialism, and Marxist theory. She has published work on gay generationalism on the contemporary stage and is currently working on projects exploring the avant-gardism of theatre-maker Reza Abdoh and the pedagogical role of Shakespeare within queer communities.