

Working-Class Creativity, Ageing & Belonging in the Arts

Flourishing Lives

Emily Bird



“We’ve always been creative, we just didn’t call it art.”



ME WEARING MY BIRMINGHAM STAGE SCHOOL UNIFORM, CASTLE VALE, 1999



ASTRAL YOUTH AND COMMUNITY CENTRE, CASTLE VALE, 1991 (BIRMINGHAM MAIL)



ME & MY SISTER, TALENT CONTESTS, HAVEN HOLIDAYS, 2000S

“...a third (30%) of artistic directors and other creative leaders were privately educated, compared with a national average of just 7%. More than a third (36%) of the organisations’ chief executives or other executive directors went to private schools.”

Who is ‘working class’ and why does it matter in the arts?
Lanre Bakare and Nadia Khomami (the Guardian, 2024)

“A kaleidoscope view of working class life means bearing witness to many shards at once...money matters deeply. But class cannot be reduced to that alone...when we focus on one shard alone, we miss how whole lives are lived and felt through the body, relationships, culture, history and place...”

Nell Ash, psychotherapist, writer and founder of Class Therapy

Follow @class.therapy on Instagram

Accent

Language

Clothing

Confidence

Taste

Behaviour

Communication

Values

History

Arts spaces are full of these signals.

If you grew up middle or upper-middle class, they can feel invisible or just normal.

If you didn't, they can feel like constant, low-level tests.

Class isn't just theory or an interesting talking point...

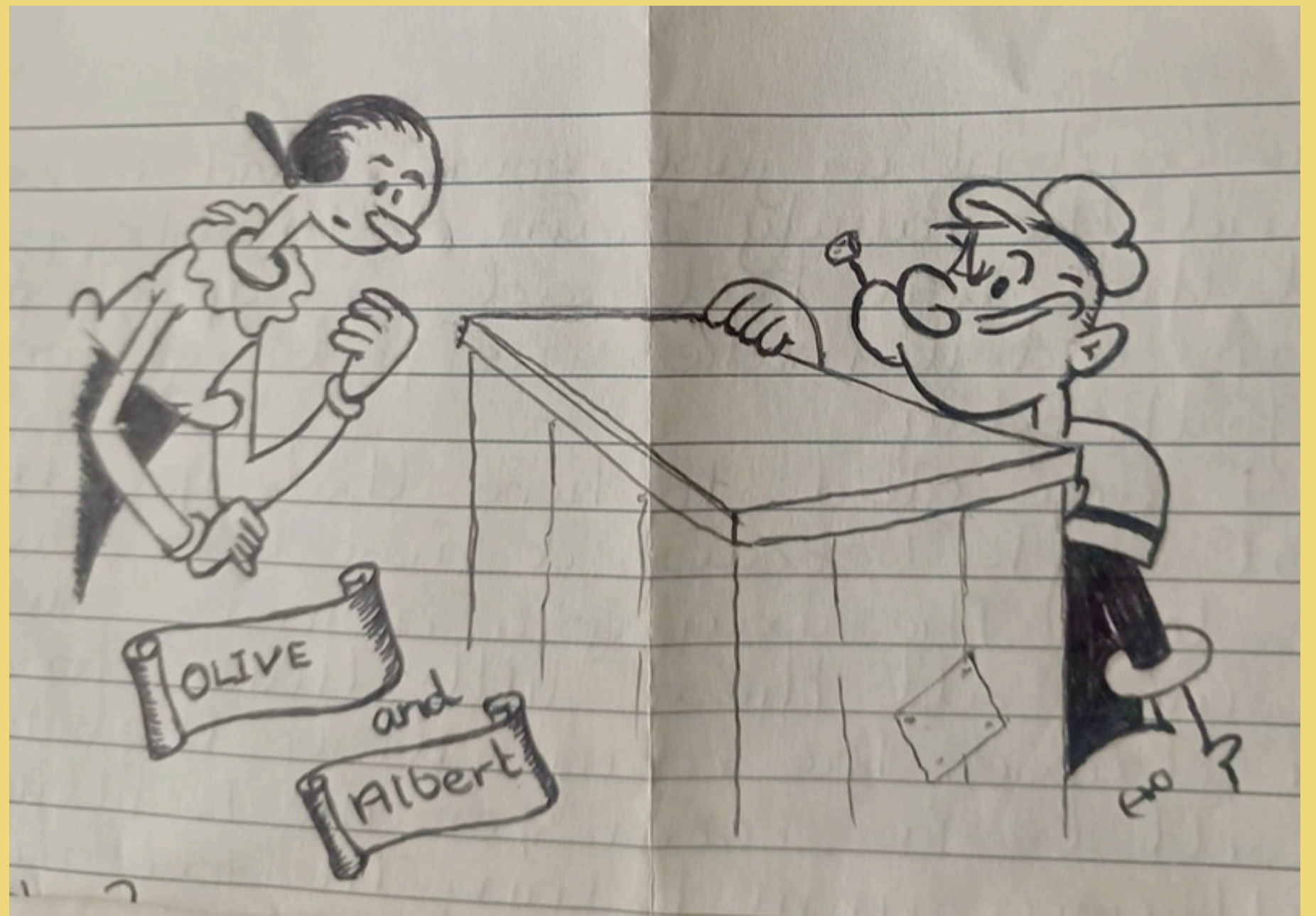
...it's felt

“In 1981 there were more young people from working class origins entering creative jobs than from upper-middle class origins; this situation had reversed in 2011.”

Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries

In many arts settings, the way we speak, critique, network, and define professionalism is **shaped by middle and upper-class culture but**

presented as universal.



DAD'S CARTOONS FOR MOM WHILST HE WAS 'AWAY', 1979

Are the arts about **widening access**
to **existing systems**?

Or are they about **redistributing**
cultural power?

“Wider society still views the working-class as beneficiaries of creative output but not necessarily the curators, originators or producers of it.”

Stephen Welsh, *Social Immobility:
Arts, Culture & Class*

What we might actually mean is:

- Under-recognised
- Historically excluded
- Not reflected in current models
- Poorly served by institutional practices



GRANDAD FRANK & FRIENDS, AT WORK
& IN THE PUB

People don't just want to be invited into spaces.

They want to feel that what they bring is ***valued.***

Whose norms shape our spaces?

Who feels they need to change to belong?

What histories are walking into the room with our participants?

The issue is not that working-class people lack creativity, it's that institutions have been selective about which creativity they ***recognise.***

Castle Vale presents

simply The Best



Starring
Birmingham Stage School
plus other artists

on
Friday 15 OCTOBER 2004

At 7:30 PM

ACT 1

- 1 TOXIC BIRMINGHAM
STAGE SCHOOL.
- 2 SUPA DOOPA LOVE
VICTORIA SHIRLEY.
- 3 THINK TWICE
VICTORIA SHIRLEY.
- 4 BABY BOY
MOVERS AND GROOVERS.
- 5 OVER THE RAINBOW
EMILY BIRD.
- 6 CHERELLE HEWSON
ON SAXAPHONE.
- 7 GIVE ME THE LIGHT
MOVERS AND GROOVERS.
- 8 SORRY
MICHAEL BAKER.
- 9 CASTLE VALE
GOLD STARS.
- 10 LONELY HEART
BEN O,HARE.
- 11 CAN CAN
B,HAM STAGE SCHOOL.

RAFFLE IN INTERVAL

SIMPLY THE BEST SHOWCASE,
CASTLE VALE COMPREHENSIVE, 2004



UNCLE STEPHEN & FRIENDS , ST CUTHBERT'S
CHURCH HALL, CASTLE VALE, 1980S



VALERIE BIRD WEARING A VALERIE BIRD ORIGINAL

What kinds of creativity do our practices and programmes already recognise and what kinds might we be ***missing out on*** when ***classism*** is present?

ENGLISH NATIONAL BALLET & LINKAGE PLUS



Dancing East

Improving physical and mental well-being in over 50s through dance classes in community centres in east London...

|| English National Ballet /

DANCING EAST AT SUNDIAL CENTRE ©
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ASH

“Growing up as a working class person, it’s (ballet) not part of your make-up.”

“Am I going to look silly?”

“I’ve never been to a ballet before...I wasn’t brought up to go.”

“I never went to an art class before Toynbee Hall... with working and raising children, you didn’t have the time.”

**TOYNBEE HALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS,
DANCE EAST**

“In my family... people were creative when they sat out on the steps together – knitting, making clothes. It was communal.”

“People might think creativity only happens in galleries and theatres...but for me, it happens at the community centre – with other people.”

**TOYNBEE HALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS,
DANCE EAST**

“I’ve surprised myself with what I turned out.”

“The classes are about mixing with people... widening your circle.”

“It’s important for your mental health, especially if you’re on your own.”

“Before doing the classes here, I would never have thought to go to the ballet...but now I’m more confident — and there’s support around us to go.”

**TOYNBEE HALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS,
DANCE EAST**

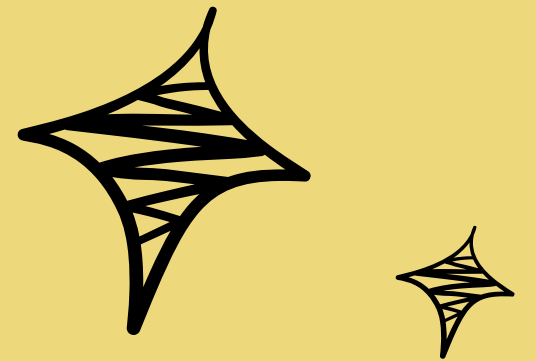
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