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‘Wish List’ by Katherine Soper

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In the past few years, the cultural industries have begun to respond to the ‘age of austerity’. At its most controversial has been ‘poverty porn’ television, the much-criticised swathe of popular factual television programmes like *Benefits Street* (Channel 4) or *Britain’s Benefit Tenants* (Channel 4). Far less controversial, have been films such as Ken Loach’s *I Daniel Blake* (2016), and Katherine Round’s documentary *The Divide* (2016). But it is perhaps the world of theatre that some of the most searing critiques of neoliberal austerity have emerged, with plays confronting the growing housing crisis (*Love*, National Theatre), in-work poverty (*Beyond Caring*, HOME) and local public spending cuts (*Hope*, Royal Court). Enter *Wish List*, Katherine Soper’s debut award-winning play tackling the inhumane and inflexible machinations of both the welfare state and the low-wage, zero-hours economy.

At the play’s centre are teenage siblings Tamsin and Dean. While his condition is never named, 17-year old Dean is suffers from acute mental distress. We witness, painfully, as Dean engages in obsessive-compulsive rituals that make it impossible for him to leave his bathroom let alone their flat. Despite this, Dean is facing the prospect of losing his employment support allowance. Since the death of their mother, 19-year-old Tamsin has been Dean’s carer, and in order to provide for Dean and herself, works 10-hour shifts packing boxes at a local warehouse on a zero-hour contract.

At the warehouse – referred to with some irony as ‘the fulfillment centre’ – Tamsin must work to the clock to meet the every-increasing targets displayed in flashing bright lights above her workstation. Paper cuts are a regular hazard of the job, so too are painful feet and aching backs. Toilet breaks are timed. The warehouse is hot and stuffy, her co-worker explaining that ‘They’ (the faceless management) won’t open any doors in case the workers steal. Soper has clearly modeled the warehouse on the exploitative working conditions exposed by recent investigations into Sports Direct and internet-shopping firm Amazon. Tamsin is part of what Guy Standing (2014) refers to as the

growing 'Precariat class', whose labour serves the interests of global capital. Indeed she is trapped in the burgeoning forms of 'poor work' -- insecure, low-paid, casualised and unstable -- that has been so carefully rendered in the empirical work of Tracy Shildrick and colleagues (2012).

In the deregulated and precarious global labour-market, securing even 'poor work' is conditional on workers proving themselves as compliant, positive, and always-available. Tamsin pleads with her supervisor for more work, telling him 'I'm available... I work hard...I can work faster'. Having not met her targets, she is asked by her supervisor if she 'possesses any psychological barriers to [her] productivity' and told she must 'work on her productivity' and 'positive attitude'. Aware of the army of eager workers ready to take her place, she cannot complain, just as she cannot expect any job security. She must remain optimistic and eager. Surrounded by Orwellian slogans - 'Work. Enjoy. Improve' - and motivational quotes demanding resilience and optimism ('Do you believe that your only limitations are the limitations you set yourself?') *Wish List* also provides a portrait of what Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn (2015) have called the creeping forms of psycho-compulsion in government workfare regimes. This refers to the ways in which 'psychological explanations. ...and mandatory activities intended to modify beliefs, attitude, disposition or personality, have become a more and more central feature of activating the unemployed and hence of people's experience of unemployment' (2015: 42).

The behavioural conditionality of Tamsin's zero-hour contract is mirrored by Dean's encounters with the welfare system. As this special issue demonstrates, conditionality has increasingly been extended to unemployed disabled benefit claimants in the UK (Baumberg, 2017). Despite his acute OCD which imprisons him within his own home, the functional capacity assessment does not recognize Dean's disability. He is assessed as 'functioning' and 'capable' of work, his disabilities not of the kind that limit his 'functional abilities' for work for Employment and Support Allowance purposes'.

The play illustrates both the devastating effect of benefit conditionality on the disabled and on those who care for them. We bear witness to Tamsin as she frantically juggles her shifts at the warehouse with caring for Dean and navigating the labyrinthine, faceless bureaucracy of the benefit system. As Tamsin leaves Dean at home alone to

start her shift, we - like her - fear what his day may bring and what she may return to ('Are we going to have a good day today Dean?'" she asks). As she reads to Dean the letter informing him that he has been deemed 'fit for work' and his benefits have been cut, Tamsin desperately tries to muster optimism, reassuring her brother that everything will be okay.

Like *I Daniel Blake*, Soper's *Wish List* exposes the inhumanity of the benefits system with devastating effect. These texts can play a crucial role in challenging 'anti-welfare commonsense' (Jensen and Tyler 2015) which individualises poverty and stigmatises benefit claimants. *Wish List* is also – like Loach's film – full of tender and funny moments, and portrays a sense of hope and quiet resilience within its protagonists. However, I would argue that *Wish List* achieves something more than Loach's film. While I greatly admire *I Daniel Blake* as an important counter narrative to 'poverty porn', its main protagonists are very easy to empathise with and care about – they appear throughout as 'good' characters, hard-working, determined, committed to education and contributing to their community. We do not see them spend money on the kinds of 'luxury' or 'excessive' consumer goods that are frequently cited within stigmatizing portrayals of the so called 'benefits scrounger' to denote their 'pathological' and 'irresponsible' consumer desire (Jensen 2013). As Abigail Scott Paul of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has argued, by presenting its characters in these ways – as morally pure and thus easily recognisable as 'deserving' – there is a risk that *I, Daniel Blake* may reproduce the cultural of poverty model that so powerfully shapes public attitudes to poverty; a thesis that:

places the issue within individual worthiness, rather than in the causes of poverty. The answer is to find a new frame, rather than continuing to occupy one based on counterproductive assessments of deservingness. (Scott Paul 2016)

Glimpses of this 'new frame' can be found in *Wish List*. While Tamsin and Dean's story draws empathy throughout, the play offers up the kind of complex, and varied representations of people on benefits that are needed in order to unravel the classificatory binary of the 'deserving and undeserving' upon which 'anti-welfare commonsense' rests. Specifically, *Wish List* bravely confronts its characters'

inescapable complicity in the capitalist system that also punishes them. In one scene, Tamsin returns home and excitedly opens a package of new (cheap) clothes she has brought off the Internet. In another scene, her supervisor asks her ‘Do you think about where your clothes come from? How much that child earned?’ Here I am reminded of Stuart Hall’s comments on Thatcherism:

Make no mistake, a tiny bit of all of us is also somewhere inside the Thatcherite project. Of course, we’re all one hundred per cent committed. But every now and then — Saturday mornings, perhaps, just before the demonstration — we go to *Sainsbury’s* and we’re just a tiny bit of a Thatcherite subject. (Hall 1987: 18)

Even if we vehemently critique it (as audiences, academics, activists, practitioners), or are punished by it (like Tamsin), we are all ‘somewhere inside’ the project of neoliberal capitalism. *Wish List* forces us to confront our complicity in the very system that has produced and normalised the burgeoning forms of ‘poor work’ in which Tamsin, and inevitably Dean, have no option but to engage in.

Soper’s play is brave, compelling and deeply moving. Not only does it render beautifully the nature of austerity, not as an economic programme of fiscal policies, but rather as something that manifests in ‘individuals lived and felt realities’ (Hitchens 2016). *Wish List* also opens up new ways of thinking about poverty, insecurity and injustice and how we might challenge these.

* *Wish List*, written by Katherine Soper and directed by Mathew Xia, plays at the Royal Court Theatre, London, from Tue 10 Jan - Sat 11 Feb

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