



# Hail!

*Jon Davies*

On April 9th, 2008, the Images Festival in Toronto screened acclaimed American dance-video artist Charles Atlas's feature-length masterwork *Hail the New Puritan* (1985–6), in an evening curated by Ben Portis and Kathleen Smith for a small but engaged audience at the Workman Theatre. *Hail the New Puritan* is a highly stylized, faux-verité “docufantasy” about British dance sensation Michael Clark, contextualizing his “ballet-based but punk-fuelled choreographies” in his glamorously and decadently queer, post-punk milieu in mid-1980s East London. I watched *Hail the New Puritan* unfold with a number of friends responsible for the monthly drag party Hotnuts, which then took place at The Beaver on Queen St. West, about four blocks from the theatre.

*Image Left: Charles Atlas. “Hail the New Puritan,” 1985–86. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York [www.eai.org](http://www.eai.org)*

Begun in 2006, Hotnuts is the brainchild of two avant-garde drag monsters, Frankfurt nightlife transplant produzentin and Newfoundland-born fashion designer and second-generation showgirl Mary Messhausen. Visual artist and filmmaker Oliver Husain typically paints the event's posters and handsome El Bear Ho capably mans the door. The themes embrace the extremes of absurdity: Hotnuts at The Lobster Beach Resort, Mannequin Bingo Troll Hotnuts, The Social Nutwork, Hotnuts Teargas & Tassles, Hotnuts Dipping Sauce, and Hotnuts of an



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Imperfect Angel are just some of the most memorable. With Mary hosting, the night features the latest house music by produzentin and a friend (such as DJ das hussy), a live performance – which has ranged from a beer- and Cheetos-slathered Britney Spears impersonator to a baroque Popeye and Olive Oyl number – and the night is free to those attending in drag. The themes loosely dictate the fashions for the evening – some, like Adult-BabyNuts or Siegfried & RoyNuts are easier to interpret sartorially than others – and for those who dress up, the challenge is to ride the fine line between high-fashion and dumpster-clown, with surrealism, creativity and outrageousness as the undisputed goals – never beauty, realness or attractiveness. Drawing from a promiscuous colour palette and eclectic textiles and props, the drag is invariably post-gender, post-taste and post-assimilation, typically extreme in its juxtapositions, and almost always homemade in look or in fact. Looking “good” means appearing as terrifying or as heretofore-unimagined as possible, and the core group has developed a familial intimacy through trying to out-trash/class one another and engaging with the shared vices of *Comme des Garçons*, Mariah Carey and Jägermeister.

A fictive diary (of sorts) pastiching narrative and performance to invoke and hyperbolize Michael Clark, his circle and their subculture, *Hail the New Puritan* was utterly captivating on that spring evening in 2008. However, what still haunts me nearly five years later is how my spectatorial experience that night vividly and profoundly embodied the kind of intergenerational exchange that I see as the *élan vital* of queer cultural world-making, an exchange that takes place as much through cultural objects like this video artwork as through living, breathing people (even though Atlas was there that night to present and discuss his work). Despite being a devout atheist, I wouldn’t hesitate to call it a spiritual experience. From mid-1980s London to late-2000s Toronto, what animated this vast gulf in time and space between Clark and his troupe performing so magnificently on the big screen, and the rows of young queers – who all converged in some way around this trashy/fashiony social hub called Hotnuts – that they enraptured? It was not so much about a shared iconography, aesthetic or identity as about a *modus vivendi* – a way of life – or more precisely, a philosophy of glamour as a powerfully democratizing force available for radical forms of creativity and kinship.

This *modus vivendi* embraces high artifice as an aesthetic and ethical playground for self-fashioning. As writer Michael Bracewell explains, Clark and his collaborators –and, I would argue, the Hotnuts circle – believe(d) that “the most interesting contemporary creativity was taking place as a consequence of subcultural lifestyle,” one that encompassed a distinctive “personal image, sexual identity, appearance





and outlook.” Deeply influenced by punk’s “dedication to amateurism, DIY aesthetics, collage and cultural archaeology” and, most importantly, its “fixation with self re-creation,” this *modus vivendi* is an embodied, viscerally performed strike against the dull and dreary abstractions of late capitalism. Forged in club culture, both *Hail the New Puritan* and Hotnuts represent a fantasy world that does not obscure difference and conflict, but that allows for provisional and precarious posturing and posing: a glamour not decided by those in power but donned through a communal leap of faith.

Produced by Channel 4 and WGBH-TV in Boston, *Hail the New Puritan* presents a day-in-the-life of Clark and his dance company, friends and acquaintances. Clark transformed the British dance landscape with his technical virtuosity, married with bold visuals and sound that drew on innovative fashion, music and club culture. It begins as Clark’s alarm goes off in what we shall assume to be his studio in Tower Hamlets, East London: he wakes and warms up before sitting for an interview with a visiting reporter, talking about starting classes at his sister’s ballet school in Aberdeen when he was 4, coming to London to attend the Royal Ballet School at 13 and developing his bad-boy reputation by getting caught “sniffing glue at midnight.” As the interview progresses, Atlas stays close to Clark’s boyish face – no doubt mesmerized as much as we are by the 23-year-old’s limitless charm, killer smile and bleached blond mohawk – and playfully cuts the interview up Godard-style, leaving us with upside-down images and random words. Clark discusses his collaborations with the band The Fall and his work with fashion designers, concluding: “when you’ve got no taste, you can do anything.” Much of the first part of *Hail the New Puritan* is firmly located in the space of Clark’s bright studio, though always intercut with shots of the street, and of snippets of his dancers’ lives. After a number of routines, Clark and co. venture into the outside world. Acting out for Atlas’s camera as they pass through their neighbourhood’s depressed vacant lots and grubby canals, they make their way to a performance of the quartet version of Clark’s 1984 choreography *New Puritans*, staged for a flock of cameramen.

The centrepiece of the video is a series of fully produced dance numbers that showcase both Clark’s formidable choreography and his deliriously imaginative visual design. At its heart, however, *Hail the New Puritan* is a study in the self-conscious fabrication (or fabulation?) of *personality*, the beguiling aura of a singular individual, and how the dynamic interplay with other “fantastics” can forge a cultural moment that reverberates long after its passing. It also shows how theatricality animates our lives: every moment that Clark is on screen is a choreographed one, to a greater or lesser degree, from a staged dance routine in



front of an audience to the simple act of preparing for bed. Here art is enmeshed with everyday life: an artist's touch is visible in Clark's most mundane gestures, and radical aesthetic experimentation is his and his circle's very life-blood.

Please indulge me as I discuss three sequences from *Hail the New Puritan* that spoke particularly strongly to my queer, Hotnuts-centric world nearly 25 years later.

## 1

The video begins with a prelude “dream sequence” that allows the opening credits to roll and sets the stage for the 24-hour period we are about to watch unfold. Initially it seems that a number of performers – including Clark in a white tutu and top printed with an image of breasts (the very parody of a classical ballerina) – are dancing, while a catty “chorus” of camp figures looks on, commenting on the action. Soon, however, the actions of the chorus reveal themselves to be just as choreographed as the dancers, as they rhythmically pace up and down the set toward a spread of food. We also note that the installing and decorating of the set and props are also highly theatrical, dances in themselves. More and more people arrive on scene, each engaged in their own choreographed activity (dancing, quipping, eating, applying makeup, reading, carrying décor, kissing), taking place in parallel – John Cage and Merce Cunningham's collaborative method taken to the limit. Their densely layered trajectories criss-cross and occasionally collide, with the overall effect a barely controlled, dizzying harmony. Under this social system, people can pretty much do as they wish: a state of freedom that could tip over into utter chaos at any moment, but is all the more thrilling for its instability. The scene neatly encapsulates *Hail the New Puritan's modus vivendi*.

## 2

There are two “dressing up” scenes in *Hail the New Puritan*: the first observes Clark and his dancers as they prepare their outfits, hair and makeup for the New Puritans. The second takes place in Clark's collaborator Leigh Bowery's elaborately designed flat, and the scene's combination of wardrobe changes, alcohol consumption and amiable shade-throwing was intensely familiar to me from many nights spent gussying up for Hotnuts at Mary Messhausen's attic apartment on Northcote Ave. Like an aftershock of the video's prelude, the scene is a complex symphony of figures, gestures and dialogue, primarily involving the flamboyant Leigh and equally fabulous friends Rachel and Trojan, though Clark also briefly stops by. The foursome trot out different outfit possibilities as the others weigh in with their bitchy *bon mots* and cutting observations.





### 3

*Hail the New Puritan* culminates in a nightclub, which becomes the stage for the artists' most dazzling aesthetic gambit. Atlas follows Clark into the club, and under his camera's gaze, the dancer's trajectory through the space becomes a carefully plotted choreography: the kisses hello, the "spontaneous" collapsing into a lap; taking a sip of a drink here, striking a pose there; affectionately squeezing one mate's arm and shimmying briefly with another; unzipping a jacket, bumping and grinding, even snorting poppers – all are orchestrated parts of the dance, almost as if the maneuvers of Clark's club-going routine were so familiar as to be performed by rote. The following scene shows all the denizens of the club speaking into the camera, one at a time. In these fleeting character sketches lasting mere seconds, the scenesters' declarations teeter between arbitrary nonsense, jaw-dropping brilliance and the numbingly mundane. They smile and grimace, flirt and antagonize in the same breath. The sequence culminates when Clark leads the entire club in a communal dance routine drawing on the physical gestures (such as flirting, drinking and dancing) that this subcultural enclave – which Atlas so vividly brings to life – is ruled by. The crowd collapses to the floor and Clark "resurrects" them before dancing out the door. He walks home as a new day in East London dawns; the music, street life and atmosphere all conspire to make this scene feel like a poetic documentary from the postwar Free Cinema movement, which poignantly memorialized England's most humble moments. Clark undresses, cools down with a solo dance (in the same white underwear he woke up in) to Elvis crooning "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" The clock strikes and *Hail the New Puritan* comes beautifully to a close:

I wonder if you're lonesome tonight  
You know someone said that the world's a stage  
And each must play a part...

*Hail the New Puritan* echoed so loudly and clearly to me that evening in no small part because of its status as a "docufantasy," one that imagined a glamorous and exciting lifestyle into being for Clark and his kin, who lived by hook or by crook in Thatcherite England. This mantra of "fake it 'til you make it" is the very life blood of Toronto queer culture, going at least as far back as General Idea and carrying on through the queercore mecca imagined into being by entities like the pioneering zine *JDs* and band Fifth Column. Arguably, we finally "made it" through these queercore efforts of GB Jones, Bruce LaBruce and many others, and there was no greater evidence of this "coming of age" than the life and work of artist, activist and nightlife wiz Will Munro (1975–2010), who catalyzed a politically and artistically radical queer scene that now must carry on – growing and evolving whichever way it will – in his tragic absence.



It was also the specificity of Clark's self-consciously decadent subculture that made a mark on me, particularly in the ephemerality of youth and the vast potential for innovation and reckless energy it represents. There was no way that such an era could ever last or be replicated – cut short as it was by so many deaths from drug addiction and AIDS (Clark himself disappeared into heroin addiction for about three years in the mid-1990s) – but it acts as a shining beacon for the like-minded who would follow. One could trace this scene's tentacles as they've reached through the last thirty years, from its influence on the American club kids we all watched on *Sally Jessy Raphael* in our formative years to Toronto performers Kids On TV, whose songs and stage acts invoke the very pantheon of queer counterculture figures we see mincing through *Hail the New Puritan*. (Tracing Leigh Bowery's influence on Toronto alone would require a PhD dissertation, though his presence in Munro's work would be a fine starting place.)

At one point in *Hail the New Puritan*, Clark runs through a train station accompanied by the unmistakable sounds of a mob of screaming fans. The pursuing fans, however, do not actually exist, and their cacophony was added in post production. The scene is a succinct moment of fantasy, and their sound echoes in my ears as I think lovingly of Hotnuts and of the play of glamour, performance and queer world-making here in Toronto.

*Hail the New Puritan* is distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix (link to: [www.eai.org](http://www.eai.org)). Unfortunately as *No More Potlucks* is a zero-budget initiative, we were unable to pay EAI the royalty fees they requested to reproduce more than one still from *Hail the New Puritan* in this essay. However, several excerpts of the work are available for viewing on YouTube (link to: [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)).

All Hotnuts photos from: [www.flickr.com/photos/produzentin/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/produzentin/)





**Jon Davies** is a curator and writer based in Toronto. In 2009, Arsenal Pulp Press published his book on Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol's film *Trash* (1970). His critical writing has appeared in *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *Fillip*, *Little Joe*, and *Cinema Scope*, and in many anthologies. He has also contributed to publications on Daniel Barrow, Candice Breitz, FASTWÜRMS, Todd Haynes, Luis Jacob, Jack Smith, Ryan Trecartin, and Andy Warhol. He has curated numerous screenings and exhibitions including the touring retrospective *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell* (2008, catalogue) and *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For* (2012–13) for Oakville Galleries, where he is currently Assistant Curator, as well as *Ryan Trecartin: Any Ever* (2010, with Helena Reckitt), *The Otolith Group: Otolith III* (2010), *To What Earth Does This Sweet Cold Belong?* (2011) and *Coming After* (2011–12, catalogue) for The Power Plant, where he was Assistant Curator from 2008–12.