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Gemma Miller

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Cross-Gender Casting as Feminist Interventions in the Staging of Early Modern Plays

By Gemma Miller¹

Abstract

This essay explores cross-gender casting of Renaissance canonical texts in modern British theatrical institutions as an act of feminist activism. Reversing early modern all-male theatrical practices, female-male re-gendering can not only interrogate the misogyny immanent in the works themselves, but also expose the ideological structures that continue to collude with these values on the contemporary stage and in society more generally. Through a comparative analysis of all-female productions such as *Julius Caesar* (dir. by Phyllida Lloyd, Donmar Warehouse, 2012-13) and selective cross-gendering, as exemplified in *Edward II*, (dir. by Joe Hill-Gibbins, The National Theatre, 2013), I argue that cross-gender casting within these most masculine of history plays constitutes a bold feminist activism that audiences, academics and critics alike have found difficult to ignore. By refusing to be bound by a cultural responsibility to reinforce the ideologies of texts born of and endorsing a patriarchal society, this essay demonstrates how women have found a way of articulating their own Foucauldian “reverse discourse” from within the power structure itself. This approach to canonical Renaissance texts constitutes a feminist activism that attacks from three different angles: it questions the “authority” of the originating (male) author; it challenges the hegemony of male-dominated theatrical institutions; and it disrupts culturally embedded ideas of gender hierarchies.

Key Words: Theatre, Shakespeare, Cross-Gender, Gender, Binarism

‘Activism: the policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; spec. the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change’ (“Activism”)

Since the amphitheatres of classical antiquity, theatre has been a site of cultural exchange—an historically contingent locus for reflecting, interrogating, subverting and re-affirming hegemonic social structures. Even in the 21st-century economy of mass-media and microtechnology, live theatre continues to exert a powerful influence over the social and political landscape, not only in terms of its reciprocal relationship with new visual media such as television, cinema and the virtual universe, but as a productive and re-productive creative institution in its own right. To the extent that theatre is a central locus of cultural exchange in a postmodern multi-faceted arena of ideas and interactions, it is not only a valuable tool for holding “as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature” (Shakespeare, *Ham* 3.2.23), but also for intervening

¹ Gemma obtained her first degree in Oriental Studies (Japanese) at Wadham College, Oxford in 1995. Having worked in finance for several years, she returned to academia in 2010 and completed a second degree in literature with the Open University. For the past 2 years, she has been studying for a Masters in Shakespeare and Contemporary Performance at Birkbeck College, and will take up a 3-year AHRC-funded doctoral research studentship at Kings College from October this year. She will be working on a thesis exploring the performance of childhood in contemporary Shakespearean productions under the supervision of Dr. Lucy Munro.

in and effecting social change. It is no surprise, therefore, that feminists have begun to turn to the theatre as a means of demystifying received notions of gender binarisms and challenging the male caretakers of our cultural heritage. In reviving Renaissance canonical texts in particular, feminist activism in modern British theatrical institutions is well-positioned not only to interrogate the misogyny immanent in the works themselves, but also to expose the ideological structures that continue to collude with these values on the contemporary stage and in society in general.

From the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, feminist scholars have been vocal in their commitment to eschewing “the linear absolutes of the male tradition” and promoting instead a “newly visible world of female culture” (Showalter 28).² Elizabeth Schafer, for instance, has reclaimed from the margins of theatre history the work of eight contemporary directors, giving “prominence to the[...] women’s own words” to demonstrate their “proficiency, even excellence” and to “evok[e] a remix of different songs, different voices, different music” (1-2). On the other side of the feminist fence, writers such as Coppelia Kahn, for instance, were arguing for the re-evaluation of Shakespeare as a proto-feminist, contending that the Roman plays in particular “articulate a critique of the ideology of gender on which the Renaissance understanding of Rome was based” (*Roman Shakespeare* 1). Valid though these approaches may be, merely promoting a “female culture” runs the risk of reinforcing the hegemony of the “male tradition” and colluding with the patriarchal enforcement of gender essentialism. Arguing for a feminist reading of Renaissance writers, meanwhile, occludes historical difference. The fostering of female talent in the form of theatre groups such as Split Britches (“an exemplary lesbian feminist theatre company” which “experiments with gender roles” (Goodman 140)),³ and Gay Sweatshop (“a mixed company of lesbians and gay men” which constitutes one of the “most influential ‘feminist’ theatre companies” in terms of what it has contributed to the “development of lesbian theatre as a genre” (Goodman 73)), obviously has its place, and is an important channel for women playwrights, directors and actors. However, due to their innovation in both form and content, it is both easy and expedient for the male establishment to marginalize the activities of feminist dramatists and relegate them to the fringe of mainstream theatre. As Colin Chambers, then literary manager at the RSC,⁴ remarked in an interview in 1986:

“There are roughly two positions inside the company...One is that we must in some way encourage women to be represented, but that they must go through exactly the same process of selection or competition or whatever as everybody else, i.e., the men. The other is that this process is precisely the process that excludes them. And that you have got to do something much more radical and actually interventionist, and that is a much bigger risk.” (Carlson 332)

Thus, while promoting an alternative literary canon and an alternative feminist theatre as a type of Foucauldian “reverse” discourse has enabled women to carve out a position in the cultural sphere outside the mainstream, these interventions are destined to perpetuate the entrenched gender hierarchies that keep them in the subordinate position of “alternative” (Foucault 101). Indeed, the terms “fringe” and “mainstream” are not ideologically neutral but, as Lizbeth

² For an overview of significant work done in this field by female actors, directors and playwrights see Goodman *Contemporary Feminist Theatres* and Schafer *Ms-Directing Shakespeare*.

³ For an in-depth analysis of the work of Split Britches see Senelick 489-491.

⁴ “RSC” is used as an acronym for The Royal Shakespeare Company.

Goodman has noted, “loaded” with the “value system of the British theatre establishment” (18). In this essay I suggest that recuperating the feminine “other” from the margins requires, as Chambers has recognised, a bolder, more radical action: a direct challenge to the masculinist hegemony from within the “mainstream”—or, to borrow Derrida’s metaphor, “using against the edifice the instruments [...] available in the house” (qtd. in Auslander 61). As Sarah Werner has noted, it is an unavoidable truism that “[a]ctors need Shakespeare to legitimize their performances” (45). However, rather than re-viewing the plays through the lens of the women characters, who are historically restricted by the political and theatrical structures of early modern patriarchy,⁵ I contend that it is only by de-gendering the traditionally male subject-position through cross-gender casting that feminists can hope to “pull [...] Shakespeare” and his contemporaries “out of a modernist, universalist stratosphere” and demand to be taken seriously on the world stage, both literally and metaphorically (Solomon 27).

In order to explore as wide a field of possibilities as possible, I have chosen to consider aspects of two female-male cross-dressing productions that demonstrate different approaches to trans-gender theatre, while using Mark Rylance’s “Original Practice” all-male production of *Twelfth Night* at the Globe⁶ as a point of comparison.⁷ What links these three plays is their generic status as history plays—a category traditionally aligned with “masculine” values.⁸ To present a cross-gender casting of significant figures within these plays constitutes a bold feminist activism that audiences, academics and critics alike have found difficult to ignore.

As a brief review of contemporary British theatre will affirm, male transvestism is a well-established practice, bearing as it does the banner of “authenticity”. This has been the well-rehearsed justification for the all-male productions at Shakespeare’s Globe on the South Bank⁹ under the directorship of Mark Rylance.¹⁰ Citing a desire to reclaim “the original theatrical force of a playwright’s writing” (Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Force* 29) as one of the aims of the newly reconstructed Globe, Rylance staged seven male-only productions under the banner of “Original Practices” during his tenure as artistic director. In an attempt to clarify the objectives of his single-gendered productions, Rylance explained in an interview with the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* in 2003 that “Original Practice” theatre was an experiment in “recover[ing] the original way of making art” in order to unearth “layers of meaning that modern practice obscures” (qtd. in Bulman. “Unsex Me Here” 233). Although he is careful to avoid explicitly using the word “authentic”, it is nonetheless implicit in his language (in particular, in the terms “original” and “recover”) and imbricated more generally in the Globe project of reconstructing the architectural

⁵ For an analysis of Shakespeare’s plays as the product of a patriarchal society see McLuskie, who contends that “a feminist critique of the dominant traditions in literature must recognise the sources of its power”, while simultaneously exhorting feminist writers to “assert the power of resistance, subverting rather than co-opting the domination of the patriarchal Bard” (106).

⁶ This production opened in Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, London in 2012, and later transferred to the Apollo Theatre, London, 2013, and New York 2014).

⁷ Performance analysis is based upon my own observances of the plays, all of which I attended in person.

⁸ I place “masculine” in inverted commas because it is a received cultural construct of gender distinctions rather than an essential set of universal traits. Tragedies and histories have always been aligned with “masculine” subject matters such as warfare, politics, and nationhood. Renaissance comedies, with their narrative movement towards marriage, are traditionally associated with strong female characters and “feminine” values such as love, family, and the domestic.

⁹ The “Globe” refers to Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre which was opened in 1997. See web-site.

¹⁰ Mark Rylance was artistic director between 1995 and 2005. The all-male productions produced during that time were: *Henry V* (1997), *Julius Caesar* (1999), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1999), *Twelfth Night* (2002), *Richard II* (2003), *Edward II* (2003), *The Tempest* (2005).

playing environment of Elizabethan theatre. These claims to historical verisimilitude are problematic for a number of reasons, not least inasmuch as there is evidence that the roles of Cleopatra and Olivia, for example, were played by boy-actors (rather than adult males) in the playing companies of Elizabethan England, whose “dependent role...double[d] for the dependency which [was] woman’s lot” (Jardine 24). Echoing this concept of “dependency”, Juliet Stevenson remarked in an interview for Carol Rutter’s *Clamorous Voices*: “our dependence in many of the plays upon our male counterparts remains inescapable. And that dependence leads us to question the choices those actors make where they have repercussions for us” (xxiv-v). Reprising his performance as Olivia in the 2012 production of *Twelfth Night*, Rylance was aged fifty-two. By replacing the iconic symbol of the boy-actor with the body of a middle-aged man, he occluded the analogy of “dependency” which would have been apparent to original audiences and, according to Stevenson’s appraisal, would be apparent even now. Moreover, to what extent the “original theatrical force” of Shakespeare’s writing can be re-created in a contemporary context with a multi-cultural, post-feminist, cyber-literate audience continues to remain a subject of contention.¹¹

The act of cross-dressing by the boy-players of Shakespeare’s theatre is an historically contingent phenomenon with its own particular socio-political, sexual and gender implications. Although cultural and textual evidence has been recovered to create a sense of how it might have been received by contemporary Elizabethan audiences, as a replicable, affective experience it is never going to be entirely recuperable.¹² The implications of staging all-male productions at the reconstructed Globe have been variously described by critics as “theme park Shakespeare”, “commodified heritage” theatre, and “cultural tourism” (White 211). Yet, in spite of the Globe’s attempts to move away from the rhetoric of “Original Practice” under the current artistic directorship of Dominic Dromgoole,¹³ the revival of Rylance’s *Twelfth Night* suggests that the Globe is not yet ready to explore more subversive attitudes towards gender hierarchies.

In her observations of the 1997 all-male production of *Henry V* in the Globe’s opening season, Pauline Kiernan noted that “the question of whether Katherine is played by a male actor or a female actor seems not to be a noticeable factor in audience responses” (Kiernan 117). In the context of my own experiences of the Globe’s all-male productions, I find this difficult to believe. And, even if it were true, I find myself asking why the director would decide to cross-cast in the first place. It was certainly not the case in Mark Rylance’s performance of Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. Acutely aware of the Globe’s status within the tourism economy, Rylance imbued his cross-dressing performance with a knowing, conspiratorial “wink” towards the audience, deliberately including them in an illusion that was more akin to drag than to “passing” (Drouin). This was particularly noticeable at the line ‘Wilt thou go to bed, Malvolio? (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*. 3.4.29), which was accompanied by an exaggerated fluttering of the eyelashes and a wide-eyed innocence that was a parody rather than a naturalistic impression of femininity. Upon meeting Viola (disguised as Cesario) for the first time, Rylance frenetically fanned his face, ricocheting wildly across the stage like a star-struck teenager. His white face-paint, stylised *gestus*, falsetto voice, and dainty, shuffling gait recalled the *onnagata* tradition of Kabuki,

¹¹ For examples of critical analyses of the problematics of staging “authentic” theatrical experiences see Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority* 189; and Rutter, *Enter the Body* 88-89.

¹² For an historical analysis of the boy-player in Elizabethan theatrical practice see Howard, Lamb, Munro and Levine.

¹³ Dominic Dromgoole has been artistic director of the Globe since 1995, and has announced he will step down in 2016.

described by Robert Hapgood as a “distill[ed]...essence of beauty that is more purely and concentratedly feminine than that of a real woman” (Hapgood 249). Rylance himself made a telling comparison between the Globe actor/spectator relationship and that of the pantomime tradition, remarking that, “[a]s actors, we need to encourage and develop the audience’s ability to play along with us” (Kiernan 132). The self-conscious display of femininity and pantomimic “play[ing] along” with the audience thus foregrounded the “performative” nature of gender, while simultaneously reinforcing biological and sexual difference within a heteronormative hegemony (Butler xxi). *Twelfth Night*, as an example of the Globe’s “Original Practice” all-male productions, constituted a self-perpetuating closed circle of masculine constructions of femininity: a *male* playwright, constructing *female* characters, who are conceptualised by a *male* director and embodied by *male* actors. Moreover, twenty-first century audiences are conditioned to see male cross-dressing with a double vision that acknowledges the body of the male actor while simultaneously accepting the illusion of the female character. It has become a convention so entrenched in the cultural psyche, that it has almost lost its ability to provoke and disturb. However, this does not mean that it is ideologically neutral, but rather, in the hands of the male establishment, has been ideologically neutered. Its political implications have been veiled under the rubric of “authenticity”. As Carol Chillington Rutter notes in *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare’s Stage*, “Let us, for one thing, be under no illusion that arguing ‘authenticity’ is harmless antiquarianism. Rather, it is a tactic of legitimation whose end is political, for it leaves Shakespeare in the sole possession of white male actors, gay or straight, Shakespeare’s only ‘authentic’ players” (88-89).

Rylance’s experiments in historical recuperation not only perpetuated a tradition of depoliticized, unprovocative pantomime-style entertainment—reconstructed authenticity of production harbouring unreconstructed gender hierarchies—but also contributed to the marginalization of women actors within the economy of the London theatre industry. Recognizing this disparity, Rylance announced the Globe’s 2003 inauguration of all-female productions, noting the injustice of “men...get[ting] many more opportunities than women to show their strength in classic roles”. However, rather than offering a politically-motivated intervention, these performances merely continued the Globe’s tradition of self-consciously ironic drag-style transvestism. As Judith Butler has noted, “drag is a site of certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes (85). Even when female directors tried to stage a feminist interpretation at the Globe, the effects were neutralized by association with the parodic drag operating in the all-male productions under the artistic directorship of Rylance, as the interpolated, doggerel-style prologue to Phyllida Lloyd’s 2003 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* makes all too clear:

‘Vice-versa’s very rare. But in this odd piece,
The girls do get the chance to wear the codpiece.
Our new productions, crammed with female talents,
May help in some way to redress the balance.’ (Klett 166)

Such ironic self-referentiality undermines the potential of drag to subvert. To quote Butler again: “Drag is not subversive when it is produced within the context of a heteronormative discourse as a temporary form of entertainment that is eventually recuperated and contained by that same discourse” (85). By situating itself in a dialectical “vice-versa” relationship with Rylance’s

parody of femaleness, *The Taming of the Shrew* neutralized any potential for disturbing gender hierarchies and limited its potential to “redress the balance”.

Within the context of the “heritage Shakespeare” practices at the Globe, spectators are more than willing to leave their politics at the door and enjoy the spectacle. As W. B. Worthen notes, “Globe performativity...arises not merely from the plays performed there but in the embodied expectations, enactment, and experience of the Globe’s performers—actors and audience” (*Shakespeare and the Force* 84). Much of the audience is made up of non-English speaking tourists so productions tend towards the presentational style that involves exaggerated stage business. Even when this is not the case, such as Phyllida Lloyd’s *Taming of the Shrew*, the gap between directorial intent and audience reception means that much of the radical potential becomes diluted at the point of performance. However, female cross-gender casting at theatres without a Globe-style concentration on “authentic” Renaissance revivals is free to operate on a more confrontational and disruptive level. By refusing to be bound by a cultural responsibility to reinforce the ideologies of texts born of and endorsing a patriarchal society, and to portray female roles written by men for boy-actors, women have found a way of “punching Daddy” from within the power structure itself (Werner 56). This approach to canonical Renaissance texts constitutes a feminist activism that attacks from three different angles: it questions the “authority” of the originating (male) author;¹⁴ it challenges the hegemony of male-dominated theatrical institutions; and it disrupts culturally embedded ideas of gender hierarchies. As Peter J. Smith has noted, “Shakespeare, if justly deployed, constitutes one of the most empowering tools for undoing pernicious and destructive prejudice” (211).

Where Rylance’s “Original Practice” troupe had the Globe theatre as a legitimizing locus of authenticity and a platform for performing its own ideology, all-female productions, until recent years, were kept in the hinterland of fringe theatre. In 1985, the RSC Women’s Group proposed an all-female production of *Macbeth* to the then co-artistic director, Terry Hands. Horrified at the idea of Shakespeare being appropriated for political ends, he reportedly closed down discussions, dismissing the suggestion as “silly” (Werner 61). This refusal to engage with a radical re-consideration of staging Shakespeare is born of a male, middle-class, Cambridge-educated elitism that was first established under the directorship of Sir Peter Hall.¹⁵ Hands did little to modernise the patriarchal legacy he inherited, and his endorsement of the Women’s Group amounted to little more than tokenism.¹⁶ In an interview with Christopher J. McCullough he betrayed his ideological agenda of perpetuating a de-historicized, masculinist directorial approach by lauding Shakespeare’s liberal-humanist focus on “universal human problems” (McCullough 122), and referring to the RSC as ‘analogous to a family’ (124).¹⁷ This was, and still is, a ‘family’ dominated by a strong paternal leadership. Twenty seven years after Hands’s conversation with the Women’s Group, Michael Dobson, director of the Shakespeare Institute and regular contributor to the RSC programme notes, remarked in an interview for the *Telegraph* that Phyllida Lloyd’s all-female *Julius Caesar* was an “important” play but that “the RSC is rather different to the Donmar Warehouse, which is all about taking...artistic risks” (Dobson).

¹⁴ The deeply entrenched idea of Shakespeare in particular as an “apparently indispensable category for preparing, interpreting, and evaluating theatrical performance” is explored at length in Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*.

¹⁵ Royal Shakespeare Company artistic director 1958–1967.

¹⁶ An in-depth explanation and analysis of the history and ideologies of this group can be found in Werner 50–68.

¹⁷ Catherine Belsey, in *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* examines the appropriation by patriarchy of liberal humanist ideals to shore up its hegemony. She asserts that to “problematize the liberal-humanist alliance with patriarchy, to formulate a sexual politics,” is “to begin the struggle for change” (221).

He was further quoted as saying: “People going to see a Shakespeare play expect realism and expect men [playing male roles.] (*sic*) This should be about realism” (Dobson). In the context of a long theatrical history of all-male Shakespearean productions, to cite the necessity for “realism” as a defence against all-female casting reveals a deep-seated prejudice endemic in the theatre industry. Dobson’s comment, moreover, came in the same year that the RSC staged a metatheatrical production of *Troilus and Cressida* in collaboration with the experimental Wooster Group and co-directed by Elizabeth LeCompte (Wooster) and Mark Ravenhill (RSC). The experimental style of this production—its web of multiple filmic and musical references; the metatheatrical use of multi-media; the clash of disjunctive acting styles—further problematized Dobson’s assertion that audiences expected, and should be given, “realism” in their Shakespeare.¹⁸

Fortunately, the Donmar Warehouse proved itself an exception to the conservative rule of mainstream theatre in 2012, by staging Phyllida Lloyd’s all-female *Julius Caesar*. Although Elizabeth Klett argues that all-female cross-gender performances are “less challenging to normative ideologies of gender” (168) than selective cross-gendering, such as that seen in Hill-Gibbins’s *Edward II*, I contend that the metatheatrical layers of framing in Phyllida Lloyd’s *Julius Caesar* was an equally radical invention, in spite of, perhaps because of, the all-female cast. To quote Alisa Solomon, this most masculine of plays “brazenly parad[ed] around in its [feminine] underwear”, creating spectatorial distance that not only rejected patriarchal conventions of realism, but also encouraged the audience to “think about and against social conventions of gender” (10).¹⁹ Moreover, by locating Shakespeare’s play within the frame of a female prison, Lloyd not only reclaimed all-female productions from the margins—the prison is often cited as one of the most common sites for the production of women-only Shakespeare (Aaron 152)—but also foregrounded the hierarchical subordination and concomitant powerlessness of women in a patriarchal society. Jean Trounstein, who wrote about teaching drama in Framingham Women’s Prison, Massachusetts, remarked of her experiences: “I began to recognize that female prisoners [...] are Desdemonas suffering because of jealous men, Lady Macbeths craving the power of their spouses, Portias disguised as men in order to get ahead, and Shylocks, who, being betrayed, take the law into their own hands” (Trounstein 2). By casting women in the powerful subject roles of Caesar, Brutus, Cassius and Mark Antony, Lloyd’s production functioned as a way to answer back to society’s marginalisation of the female object. Moreover, relating Roman history through the bodies of female actors amounted to an excoriation of a hegemony that valorized—and through an interventionist Western foreign policy still continues to valorize—the “masculine” values of war and aggression. Finally, it provided a riposte to the likes of Hands and Dobson, whose reactionary politics even today reflect the anxieties of a culture haunted by unruly women who, like the witches in *Macbeth*, “will not stay in place” (Belsey, “Afterword” 261).

In an overtly political—and metatheatrical—act of intervention, Lloyd not only utilised the locus of a prison as a conceptual frame, but also cast two actors from the charity “Clean

¹⁸ The Wooster Group is an experimental theatre company established in 1975 and based in New York. They create dramatic pieces based on a combination of autobiographical elements and canonical plays, often utilising multimedia in their performances. Their style is metatheatrical, provocative and political, addressing “the victimization of women, racism and the multifarious processes of dehumanization” (Savran 1).

¹⁹ For further analysis of realism as a patriarchal convention, see Case. “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic”. 282-99. In particular, her statement that “the heterosexist ideology linked with its stage partner, realism, is directed against women ... the closure of these realistic narratives chokes the women to death” (297).

Break” in the parts of Trebonius and Soothsayer.²⁰ The Clean Break web-site is clear about its role as an activist organisation, citing as its mission the use of theatre to empower women to “challenge their oppression by society in general and by the criminal justice system in particular”. The rhetoric of incarceration was repeated in the play’s programme notes, which contained an historical description of “Rome under the Dictator” as “claustrophobic, teeming with informers and subject to sudden searches” (Harris). This linguistic mirroring conceptually bridged the gap between the realism of the framing device, which saw, for instance, Frances Barber cast as a prison guard, and the fictional world of the play-within-a-play, in which that same guard played Caesar. A judicious doubling of roles within the play-within-a-play further reinforced the parallels. For instance, a visibly pregnant Portia (a reference to ‘Your weak condition’ (Shakespeare, *JC* 2.1.235) doubled as Octavius Caesar. No attempt was made to disguise her pregnant belly, which remained clearly visible beneath her army fatigues. This functioned as an iconic reminder that we, the spectators, were watching a female actor playing a female prisoner playing both a wife/mother and Roman general in a play. The effect of this multi-layering was a dizzying Brechtian-style alienation that de-emphasized gender difference by highlighting its “performativity”: what Judith Butler calls “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2).

By dint of its association with a feminist group such as Clean Break, Lloyd’s *Julius Caesar* announced itself as a form of theatrical activism—a position that was carried through in the metatheatrical nature of the production itself. Intermittent reminders of the play-within-a-play concept functioned to complicate the real/artifice dichotomy and distance the audience from the action, allowing space for consideration of the themes on display. For instance, the actress playing Cinna the Poet was interrupted mid-line by a tannoy announcement instructing her to collect her medications. She was then led off by a prison guard and another prisoner was handed a copy of the text and told to assume the role. Action was stopped again by the guards when the prisoner understudying Cinna was beaten so badly by her fellow actors/prisoners that she began to bleed. Blurring the lines between reality and illusion, past and present, framing device and play in this way not only highlighted the plight of real women driven to violence through the inequities of a male-dominated criminal justice system, but also laid bare the workings of a masculine history of nation-building based on power and aggression.

In her analysis of the “ideology of the visible”, Peggy Phelan defines the dialectic of self and other, male and the female, as a power relationship dominated by the “male gaze”. Drawing analogies with the theatre, she asserts that “the inequality between performer and spectator” relies on “a stable point upon which to turn on the machinery of projection, identification, and (inevitably) objectification” (Phelan 163). Although she remains sceptical about the female object’s ability to disrupt this stability without aesthetically denying representation altogether, I believe that Lloyd’s *Julius Caesar* was able to mount a challenge to the hegemony of male desire by *re-staging* as opposed to *removing* representation. The frame structure provided its own spectator/performer paradigm, whereby the female actors were not only the objects but also the subjects of the theatrical exchange. This positioned the audience on the periphery of the

²⁰ Clean Break, an all-female theatre company, is a registered charity that works with women within the criminal justice system. It was established in 1979 by two female prisoners at the Yorkshire Askham Grange prison. On the “JustGiving” charity web-site it is described as an organisation that “uses theatre to change lives, working with vulnerable women and girls in the criminal justice system enabling them to build a better life away from crime. Through ground-breaking and award-winning plays we dramatise their experience of, and relationship to, crime and punishment.”

spectacle, denying them a “coherent point of view” from which to project the “Self” onto the unmarked “Other” (163). Moreover, re-staging the female body as both male and female without attempting to codify gender through costume, make-up or gesture, not only had the effect of effacing sexual difference, but also posed a challenge to the objectification of women in the economy of the “visible”. Philip Auslander defines theatrical “presence” as the “actor as manifestation before an audience... a concept related to *charisma*” (62). He goes on to explain how, “by undermining her own presence”, the performer can “escape identification as the Other and the power relations implied by that identification” (63). It is my contention that the multiple layers of character and gender presented in one and the same body in Lloyd’s *Julius Caesar* amounted to a denial of “presence” or “charisma” that encouraged the spectator to focus on the process rather than the embodiment of representation. The result was neither a parodic impersonation of the opposite gender (as in Rylance’s *Oliva*), nor a nineteenth-century “breeches” style of transvestism, designed to display, rather than veil, the female form.²¹ By deconstructing the hierarchies of spectator and performer, subject and object, the actors were thus able to disrupt male/female hierarchies and expose gender as a discursive formation.

According to Peggy Phelan’s “ideology of the visible” (163), the power of the unmarked, unspoken, and unseen female object is erased by its subordinate position vis-à-vis the male spectator. Phelan’s contention is that the power resides with the male subject, and thus the female body and the female character cannot be “staged” or “seen” within representational mediums without challenging the hegemony of patriarchy. I contend that Hill-Gibbins’s production of *Edward II* undermined the male/female paradigm through selective cross-gender casting that not only mounted a challenge to contemporary sexual politics but also re-inscribed the “mute body” in the masculinist metanarrative of nation-building. The body of the female actor playing Prince Edward presented anomalous signifiers that challenged any audience attempts to comfortably attach a stable gender identity. Prince Edward entered with Isabella, holding her hand in the familiar manner of a child and a parent. However, this iconic mother/son image was complicated by the disjunction between the actor’s body, the costume and the character being presented. The female actor who played the young prince, was a diminutive five-foot tall, her hair cut into a “page-boy” style, and her gait awkward and childlike. Yet when she spoke, she made no apparent attempt to conceal her feminine voice, and the curve of her hips and breasts were visible beneath her costume. As was the case with the actor playing both Portia and Octavius Caesar in Lloyd’s production, the slippage between actor and character and the gendered body was foregrounded.

Aoife Monks has noted that “[c]ostume must appear as costume” in order to foreground the distinction between “real” actors and the roles they play” (79). Although the short trousers and blazer functioned on a metonymic level as signifiers of a schoolboy, the self-evident “femaleness” and adult nature of the actor’s body necessitated a form of “double vision” in the spectator, whereby he experienced the phenomenological “self-givenness” of the costume. This apparently deliberate foregrounding of the distinction between the corporeal body of the actor and the fictional body of the stage character had the effect of a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, which, as Bert O States has noted, infiltrates “into the security of stage illusion and, by extension, into the passive security of the audience” (93). The actor simultaneously embodied both femininity—in her voice, breasts and undisguised facial features; and male pre-adolescence—in her boisterous, childlike movements and Eton-style uniform. This not only made explicit the “dependent” analogy between the boy-actor and female subject that is implicit in modern

²¹ For an analysis of male impersonation on the nineteenth-century stage see Fletcher.

Elizabethan revivals, but also functioned to denaturalize gender difference. The final image of the play was centred upon the newly-crowned Young Prince Edward, triumphantly dispensing commands and asserting his new-found power. This provided a telling point of comparison with the interpolated opening dumb-show, in which his father self-consciously revelled in the pomp of office, without the accompanying authority so naturally attaching to his son. As Dominic Maxwell noted in *The Times* review: “as Edward II’s schoolboy son holds the stage in his shorts and blazer at the end,...he does so with a confidence and a clarity that his decadent daddy never came near” (785). The slippage between female actor and male character added a further dimension that Maxwell’s review did not take into account. The “decadent daddy” was not only being replaced by a “schoolboy son”, but by a woman impersonating a “schoolboy”. The hope of a nation’s future, the production seemed to suggest, was being placed in the hands of both a woman and a man. The effect was not the reversal of gender hierarchies but the deconstruction of gendered bodies.

All three play texts under consideration in this essay close with the restoration and reinforcement of patriarchal order. For *Twelfth Night* it is the conventional comedic reconciliation through marriage, bringing the unruly cross-dressing Viola into the heteronormative order as Orsino’s “mistress and his fancy’s queen” (5.1.381). In the case of *Julius Caesar*, Brutus, “the noblest Roman of them all” (5.5.69) is eulogized with an affirmation of his masculinity: “This was a man!” (5.5.76). For *Edward II*, the new regime is legitimized by the “murdered ghost” of patrilineal succession, as Edward III offers sacrifices to the memory of his “[s]weet father” (25.99). This rhetoric of patriarchy, which was affirmed by the parody of femininity on display in the Globe’s *Twelfth Night*, was undermined by the insistent presence of the female body in both *Julius Caesar* and *Edward II*. This created a visual/aural dissonance that not only challenged gender hierarchies, but also re-inscribed the “mute body” in the masculinist narrative of nation-building. To return to Phelan, the female actors in Lloyd’s *Julius Caesar* re-defined the terms of the “ideology of the visible” paradigm (163) by appropriating both subject and object position, while the cross-cast actor playing Edward III denied the subject a gendered object to possess. By disrupting the authority of the “male gaze” in this way, both of these productions challenged the means to possess and subordinate the female body. Rather than reinstating gender difference by merely inverting the patriarchal paradigm, these theatrical interventions opened up instead the possibility of a future whereby feminist activism “might negotiate [a] way out of the bipolarity of definitions—the Aristotelian taxonomies of hierarchical difference” (Case “Introduction”, 13). The power of theatre to effect social change has been evident through history, from the staging of *Richard II* on the eve of the 1601 Essex rebellion to the price riots of 1809. It has been used as a tool for reinforcing and undermining power structures, and has functioned as both a mirror and a target for social anxieties. As a site for feminist activism, therefore, it has the potential for bringing about wide-ranging and radical political change. When used strategically, female-male cross-dressing can challenge not only what gendered bodies should look like, but what the world in general should look like. Far from being a prurient form of Victorian entertainment or Freudian sexual displacement, “[t]o wear the codpiece”, to borrow Elizabeth Klett’s expression (183), can effect nothing short of a feminist revolution.

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