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# Towards Gender Inclusive Representation in the Theatre: The Actor and the Spectator

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Towards Gender Inclusive Representation in the Theatre:  
The Actor and the Spectator

by

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Accepted by:

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This piece of writing is aimed at theatre practitioners who might not have a background in feminist critical theory. Its main function is to help these practitioners to aware of how they might- in the theatre- propagate gender stereotypes. It provides thorough and accessible explanations of the concepts central to feminist critical theory. It argues that in order to create a truly inclusive theatre, the spectator and the actor must be resistant towards gender-based oppression.

## PREFACE

I call this piece of writing a book. It is not. It's a thesis. Or at least it is being written to fulfill a thesis requirement. The reason why I have chosen to refer to it as a book is because its tone is personal, and if there is anything that I have learned throughout the process of writing this book/thesis, it's that *words matter*. When we hear the word 'thesis' we might think of a clunky piece of academic writing, heavily researched, filled with quotations and dense language. I did not want to write that kind of thesis. My goal was to create an accessible piece of scholarship that could be read by anyone. I knew that this did not mean that my research or writing process had to be any less academic than the traditional thesis-writing process; it merely meant that I had to pay extra attention to words. I had to constantly ask myself, have I said this in the clearest way possible?

When I first learned that I had to complete a thesis in order to earn my Master's degree, I did not fret. I started to note which lessons, topics, and readings excited me. I knew that I wanted to be passionate about the project that I choose to pursue, because this would allow the writing process to feel fulfilling and purposeful. I noticed that I continually gravitated toward dramatic theory and performance theory. I liked theoretical questions. I liked questions that considered art in the context of a larger framework, especially unanswerable and subjective questions like '*why do we do art?*' or '*what are the capabilities of art?*'

As I pursue my MA in theatre from the University of South Carolina, my husband (Matthew Cavender) is obtaining his MFA in acting from the very same department. He has had the opportunity to work under the guidance of two brilliant artists Robyn Hunt and Steve Pearson, founders of The Pacific Performance Project/East. Hunt and Pearson *are* performance theorists, in the sense that they are performers who constantly consider these larger framework questions about theatre and art. Their approach to acting has been greatly influenced by their time working with the noted Japanese theatre director, Mr. Tadashi Suzuki. They have also been deeply influenced by the work of Mr. Shogo Ohta and his “slow tempo” methodology.

Each day, Matt would return from his classes (*Training* taught by Hunt / *Process* taught by Pearson) and share with me small tidbits of knowledge harbored by these two instructors: terms, theories, and concepts developed by Hunt and Pearson through their years of experience working as professional actors, teachers, and directors. Now aware of my interest in performance theory, I wanted to know more than Matt’s rushed rendition of their lessons, shared over dinners in our thirty-minute windows between classes and Matt’s evening rehearsals... so, I emailed Hunt and asked her to meet with me for coffee. She accepted, and we met. I had prepared a list of questions, half of which were taken from things that I had read, the other half, from things that I had heard Matt talk about. However, for each question asked, there were ten lessons to be learned, and these lessons were too big to be absorbed through afternoon coffee. She finally said to me, quoting a care text for Zen/Buddhist training, “Don’t confuse the moon with the finger pointing at the moon.” And so, Robyn Hunt graciously invited me to take her training that next semester, so as to bring me

closer to seeing the 'moon' itself. And in the process of training, a thesis topic conveniently found its way into my hands.

I will more clearly articulate what this topic is (and how it relates to training) in a minute. However, I feel as if this book or thesis (or whatever you'd like to call it) needs a disclaimer- or a few disclaimers- so I will share those with you before I start:

(1) I reserve the right to change my opinion at any time about the statements which you will read in the pages to follow. The discoveries and observations that I have made mark where I am in my career as a scholar, theatre practitioner, and feminist *now*, and I am fairly certain that in a year from now, or ten, my opinions will likely have evolved. I recently found this Peggy Phelan quotation in the book *Acting Out: Feminist Performances* which nicely encapsulates what I am trying to express here. She states, "I need to continually rewrite my essay, repeat my desire to say it right, because I recognize the pervasive force of misrecognition, doubt, mistake, uncertainty at the level of the signifier, and the bonds and boundaries of location. My understanding of the unavoidability of misunderstanding leads me to believe this mistaking is history, the history in front of us no less than the history behind us. This is the history we recite and always rewrite" (Phelan 17). This Phelan quotation addresses two vital topics. First, it is important that we re-visit our own scholarship in order to ensure that we have articulated our ideas in the most transparent way possible. Second, it is important to acknowledge the fact that our unique perceptions of language will make it so that we all read texts differently. While it is my goal to write as clearly as possible, to make it so that you understand the (difficult) concepts that I am going to attempt to unpack, I, like Phelan, recognize that



every reader will have varying interpretations of my words. Like most pieces of scholarship, I have woven my observations into the foundational web laid down by other scholars. As Phelan notes, it is possible (nay, it is absolutely the case) that my explanations of these other scholars' theories are tinged with my own perceptions. Therefore, if anything elicits your interest, I encourage you to look directly at the source at hand.

(2) In the second section of this book, ACTOR, I will share with you some observations I have made about potential ways for the female actor to upset the male gaze by fully experiencing her own autonomy. I must confess that I am not an actor (in the sense that I do not work as an actor, nor am I working towards a degree in acting), although I have acted many times in my life. This section might prove this 'identifier' to be unnecessary (to say "I am an actor" or "I am not an actor") for we will discuss the ways in which *all* people are actors, in the sense that all people 'perform' in their daily lives, modifying their behavior based on social interaction.

(3) I will also discuss some of the lessons that I have learned as a pupil of Robyn Hunt, who, as I have mentioned before, was gracious enough to allow me to take her actor-training class (titled *Training*) even though I am not an MFA acting student. I have found that Robyn has a gift for carefully choosing which words she uses in the classroom. Sometimes she will "phrase lessons in the positive," telling us what we should *try* to do in a kata<sup>1</sup> rather than what we should *not* do. She might avoid using words that enforce tension, like *to freeze* or

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<sup>1</sup> This is a term taken from Martial Arts, which refers to practice movement patterns. Hunt utilizes the kata form in her training. She prefers New York Times writer Sam Sifton's definition of kata: "forms whose repetitions bring excellence."

*to brace* and might encourage us *to find readiness* or *stillness* instead. In our more improvisational work, she might purposefully use ambiguous language so as not to influence our decision making process (she might instruct us to try something with an “awake spine,” or as if there is someone in the room whom we are able to cool off with the way we move our arm). I will later argue that this pedagogical choice, to pay extra attention to the meanings associated with words, and to constantly be aware when words might impact the autonomy of the actor, is one teaching approach that might be considered feminist. However, I am also aware that this purposeful and considerate ambiguity increases the likelihood that I might misrepresent Hunt’s ideas. This misrepresentation is not purposeful, and if we consider the Phelan quote once again, this misrepresentation might be unavoidable. With that said, it is my deepest wish that Hunt publishes a book or essay written in her own precise and carefully articulated words, so that you, reader, have the opportunity to hear her brilliant voice, and that this text, can therefore be taken as a pupil’s diary, rather than a teacher’s lesson-book.

(4) This point (that you must read my words understanding that I am merely Hunt’s pupil) leads me to another important point. I have only studied under Hunt for two semesters, and I am sure that she and others who have studied under her would agree— training is something which takes time. It must live within the body for a while. And the more one does it, the more capable one gets at finding ease when articulating difficult movements. I watched my husband undergo this transformation as he trained with Hunt for his first year, second year, and third year of graduate school. He remembers having a few moments throughout these three years when he experienced... let us not say

'breakthroughs,' but rather... moments of 'increasing bodily intelligence', heightened awareness of how to achieve what Hunt calls "un-panicked emptiness<sup>2</sup>." There have been a few occasions where former students of Hunt and Pearson have attended class and trained with us-- students who have lived with the training for even longer than Matt's three years-- and watching these actors work helps solidify my opinion that time and practice is crucial for progress in this work. Therefore, as you read this text you must be aware that I am not only a mere pupil, but I am also a pupil who has not been one for very long.

Now that I have laid out these four (lengthy) disclaimers, I will share with you why I have chosen to write about this topic. The theatre and I were once good friends. I used to enjoy watching theatre, reading theatre, even participating in theatre. But during the years prior to my writing of this thesis, the theatre and I had a 'falling out' of sorts. Almost every theatre production that I watched seemed clichéd and commercial; even academic theatre, which is supposed to be untethered to the confining chains of turning a profit, was falling into this capitalist trap. Therefore, I started to think of theatre more like business than an art, and a business that (more often than not) hindered the intellectual growth of society rather than helping it. These responses were, of course, indicative of the kind of theatre that I *personally* had been seeing, and not of theatre in general.

My biggest qualm with the theatre that I had been seeing was rooted in my identity as a feminist; as a person who wants to abolish a universal culturally

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<sup>2</sup> Hunt says that her use of the term was influenced by Peter Brook.

constructed idea of what it means to be a *woman*. The theatre that I had been watching was propagating absolute gender stereotypes. Woman's relationship to play scripts was often determined by her relationship to the male protagonist (was she his mother, wife, sister, daughter?) and if she was allotted a central position in the narrative, she was made out to be something ogled at by the spectator. Female actors were almost always thin and attractive, and they were often costumed in a way that accentuated their alignment with the beauty ideal. I have heard other spectators complain that this trope (of casting only attractive actors) "removes" them from the action of the play because the exclusively attractive cast is not representative of the diverse appearances that we see in our world. My problem with this trope, however, is not rooted in a desire to see verisimilitude on the stage. I enjoy non-realistic and stylized theatre. Rather, my qualm with 'casting only attractive actors' is rooted in feminism. I desperately want to conceive of a theatre where the female body is placed onstage without being sexualized. I have noticed that this sexualization is perpetuated by almost all people involved in the theatre-making process: the casting director, the costume designers, the directors, those in charge of advertising and making posters, the spectator, even the actor herself. So this book/thesis is motivated by the question: *how can we change this?*

In the first section of this book, SPECTATOR, we will discuss feminist reception theory. We will discuss *how* we watch plays and how/why we often watch plays through the perspective of heterosexual male eyes (the *male gaze*). I, as a spectator (and as a feminist), was sick of watching this happen; of being manipulated to objectify the bodies of other women onstage. The second section of this book, ACTOR, will discuss ways in which the actor might be able to

subvert the male gaze. It will discuss actor-training systems and how the *process* of creating theatre has the potential to liberate the feminist actor. Furthermore, it will consider my personal experience training under the guidance of Robyn Hunt, and will conjecture that that experience has been a feminist one.

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“A feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women. It means paying attention to when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not. It means making some ‘invisible’ mechanisms visible and pointing out, when necessary, that while the emperor has no clothes, the empress has no body.”

— Gayle Austin

## INTRODUCTION

*Who is this book for? What is it about? How should you read it?*

This book is for theatre practitioners and theatre participants— those who *make* theatre, those who *watch* theatre, and those who do both. The two parts of this work— ACTOR and SPECTATOR target some of these specific roles, although it is important to note that theatre is often made by many others who are not described in these sections (directors, designers, managers, technicians, etc.). I do not mean for this exclusion to be interpreted as an erasure, or as a measure of importance (or lack of importance).

Jerzy Grotowski (author of *Towards a Poor Theatre*) theorized that the actor and spectator are the only two components required for an act of theatre to exist. In fact, he stated that the purpose of his Laboratory Theatre was to examine “the nature of theatre and find out how it differs from the other art forms, and what it is that makes it irreplaceable” (Grotowski 28). In other words, he asked the question, what can we strip away from the theatre, and more importantly, what *can't* we? If we get rid of costumes, sets, lights, and music, can we still create a piece of theatre?

Similarly, Peter Brook begins his book *The Empty Space* with the following statement: “I CAN take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (Brook 7). Brook clarifies that this



minimalistic form of theatre is not often what we think of when we hear the word *theatre*, which is more often than not associated with “red curtains, spotlights, blank verse, laughter, darkness” (Brook 7). I start off my “Intro to Theatre” class by asking my students to define the theatre, or at least describe it. Their experiences with theatre are often limited, and the few shows that they have seen have been spectacle-intensive Broadway productions. For them, and for many others, the spectacle is a necessary component of theatre. It is central to their understanding of what the word theatre means. So... directors, designers, managers, and technicians... for many, you are integral to the act of creating theatre. For others, you provide artistic elements that can be layered on top of the theatre’s core, which involves the mere spectator and actor.

This book is about representation in the theatre. Representation is what happens when you put something on a stage (or in an empty space called a stage) and tell someone to look at it. Whatever image you choose to present suddenly becomes quite important. And similarly, whatever you choose to exclude suddenly seems to be purposeful. More specifically, it is about the representation of gender on the stage. Gender, unlike sex (which is biological), refers to the societal constructs assigned to us because of our sex. Jill Dolan defines gender as “a fashioning of maleness and femaleness into the cultural categories of masculinity and femininity; adjectives that describe cultural attributes that determine social roles” (Dolan 6). Therefore, this book considers both a) the images presented before a spectator and b) any cultural constructions that the spectator might use to interpret the images presented before them.

This book is orientated towards those who might not have a background in feminist critical theory and those who might not have considered the fact that

our theatre tends to be exclusive or oppressive towards women. I will propose throughout this book that pedagogy (teaching) is one of the most effective ways to upset the male gaze. Therefore, it is my hope that you, the reader of the book, will find my explanations of feminist theory to be accessible, and that you can resort to this book as a manual of sorts. I will also propose that the male gaze can only be disrupted if the spectator and actor are liberated simultaneously from its binding chains. We must collaborate on this project, and we must encourage other theatre practitioners to join our collaboration.

### *Defining and Categorizing Feminism*

As I have just stated, the goal of this work is to educate most all theatre practitioners, especially those who might not have a background in feminist critical theory, so that we can, collectively, create a more equally representative theatre. Therefore, I will take some time to introduce some key concepts of feminist theory. I believe that by outlining these building blocks, we will be able to more clearly understand the ways in which woman's representation in the theatre is consciously employed as a means of furthering her oppression.

Let us start with a discussion of what feminism is, keeping in mind that the answer to this question is subjective. Allison Jaggar remarks on the fact that feminism is a word with contrasting connotations; "For some, it is a pejorative term; for others, it is honorific. Some people deny the title 'feminist' to those who would claim it, and some seek to bestow it on those who would reject it" (Jaggar 5). For some, defining feminism is simple; it's all about gender equality. But if you ask various feminists who use this definition what "gender equality" looks like, they will most likely have differing answers. Some believe that gender

equality is rooted in our careers (If women are paid the same as men, we've achieved it)! Others believe that gender equality is rooted in the equal sharing of household duties (If men take equal part in domestic tasks and childcare, we've achieved it)! I believe that these feminists are only at the beginning of their journey to understanding and adopting a feminist lifestyle, and I do not mean for that to sound condescending. The beginning is a very good place to be, especially if one is committed to moving forward.

In Allison Jaggar's pivotal book *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, she loosely defines feminism as "all those who seek, no matter on what grounds, to end women's subordination" (Jaggar 5), although her book is ultimately geared towards creating more specific definitions of feminism. She suggests that certain conceptions of feminism are more geared towards the advancement of women on an individual scale, while others are more group oriented. The categories that she creates were instrumental in helping contemporary feminist scholars to better differentiate between types of feminism, which ultimately helps us to understand what this word means.

I am partial to the categorizations used by Jill Dolan in her book, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Her categories parallel those outlined by Sue-Ellen Case in *Feminism and Theatre*. Dolan states that American feminism can be divided into three categories: (1) Liberal Feminism, (2) Radical Feminism, and (3) Materialist Feminism. She believes that these three categories are the "most inclusive and most useful for clarifying the different feminist ways of seeing" (Dolan 3). In other words, these categories will specifically facilitate our discussion of gender representation on the stage, and how we visually perceive gender. Gayle Austin nicely organizes Case and Dolan's types of feminism in her

own book, *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*, using the following succinct list (which can be quite handy for quick references):

- 1) Liberal Feminism →
  - a. Seeks to minimize differences between men and woman
  - b. Works for success within social systems; Encourages reform instead of revolt
  - c. The success of each individual woman is more important than the group
- 2) Radical Feminism (also known as 'cultural feminism') →
  - a. Stresses the superiority of female attributes and difference between male and female modes (i.e. alludes to the fact that woman's power comes from her body)
  - b. Again, the individual takes precedence over the group
- 3) Materialist Feminism →
  - a. Minimizes biological differences between men and women
  - b. Stresses the notion that material conditions of production (such as history, race, class, gender) affect woman's subordination
  - c. The group is more important than the individual (Austin 6)

### *Liberal Feminism*

Liberal feminism seeks to empower women within the institutional structures that already exist in society. In the words of Jill Dolan, it attempts to "insert women into the mainstream of political and social life by changing the cultural perception of them as second class citizens" (Dolan 4). When successful, this goal allows us to see more women involved in politics and business. Within the realm of theatre, it encourages more female directors, designers, playwrights, and administrators.

Its title, "liberal feminism," purposefully references liberal political philosophy, which, as Allison Jaggar notes, "emerged with the growth of capitalism" (Jaggar 27). Liberal political philosophy, she explains, is based off a

number of enlightenment-era beliefs. Enlightenment thinkers stress the importance of values like individual dignity, equality, autonomy, and self-fulfillment (Jaggar 39). These thinkers also assume the “rational nature” of humankind (like John Locke, who believed that man’s inherent rationality is what distinguishes him from other living creatures). This conception of rationality, Jaggar states, “is conceived as a property of individuals rather than groups” (Jaggar 28).

Therefore, liberal feminism is often criticized for being “radically individualistic” (Dolan 3), for it praises individual women who are able to succeed within the framework of a patriarchal, capitalist society. Therefore, it does not question *why* women have historically been subordinated and instead tries to re-envision the world *as if* women had not been subordinated. In other words, liberal feminists are able to envision what the problem of women’s oppression would look like *if* it were solved, but neglect to figure out how to solve it. It is, perhaps, better to question how our way of thinking (our ideologies) have created a space for unbalanced power dynamics to exist in society.

### *Radical Feminism*

Radical feminism, which Dolan refers to as ‘cultural feminism’, tends to stress the differences between men and woman, and ultimately attempts to “reverse the gender hierarchy” by conjecturing that “female values [are] superior to male values” (Dolan 6). More specifically, radical feminists believe that female power derives from woman’s ability to bear children, thus linking womankind to the realms of “nature” and “spirituality.” Furthermore, radical feminists suggest that women are “instinctively pacifistic,” given their biological link with

“nurturing” children (Dolan 7). This way of thinking encumbers women, for it reduces women to the biological capacities of their bodies and renders childless and infertile women powerless.

Radical feminism is often criticized for the way that it stresses *essentialism* (the idea that people have “essences” or “meanings” that precede their birth) rather than *existentialism* (the idea that something exists and then finds its “essence” or “meaning”). This same concept is sometimes referred to using the terms *nature* and *nurture*. It allows us to ask the question: are people *born* to be a certain way, or do their societies influence them to *become* a certain way? Those who believe the former, that people are *born* to be a certain way, are more likely to perpetuate oppressive or hierarchal social systems (for they might suggest that a certain gender, sex, or race is inherently superior to another).

As mentioned before, many radical feminists think of woman’s body as her source of power, and encourage women to use their bodies/listen to their bodies when creating art. This idea was perpetuated in the French writing style, *l’écriture féminine*<sup>3</sup>, which can be translated to mean “women’s writing.” It involves the replacement of male-language with its opposite— “a supposedly contiguous, fluid, irrational, body-centered, fragmentary, non-linear, open, female language” (Dolan 87).

#### *Materialist Feminism*

The majority of feminist theatre scholars who have influenced my writing of this book— Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan, Gale Austin, Elaine Aston, among others— have encouraged feminists to adopt this form of feminism, which is

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<sup>3</sup> This term was coined by H el ene Cixous in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of Medusa”

rooted in the deconstruction<sup>4</sup> of gender and the understanding that woman's oppression exists in a matrix alongside other forms of oppression, related to one's race, ethnicity, religious, sex, sexual orientation, economic status, ability, etc. As Dolan states, this type of feminism "frames the debate over gender in more gender-neutral terms than either liberal feminism, which would absorb women into the male universal, or cultural feminism, which would overturn the balance of power in favor of female supremacy" (Dolan 10). It is the feminism most geared towards true gender equality, and even provides a definition for what that equality might look like.

For Sue-Ellen Case, materialist feminism involves contextualizing woman's oppression through a historical lens. She believes that "women's experience cannot be understood outside of their specific historical context" (Case 82). By orienting woman's story in history, one is able to see the way that class and other socio-economic factors have placed women on the periphery. Case elaborates:

The organization of the forces of production and the role of wages create the situation of the worker. In the market place, the woman worker has generally been paid lower wages than the man and retained a subordinate position without upward mobility. In the domestic sphere, unpaid housework and unpaid reproductive and child-rearing labor have been instrumental in shaping the condition of women. The nuclear family is perceived as a unit of private property, in which the wife-mother is exploited by the male as well

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<sup>4</sup> Deconstruction is a term that was introduced by Jacques Derrida.

as by the larger organization of capitalism. As a result of the specific economic conditions of women, in which they are exploited by virtue of their gender, some materialist feminist have established women as a class, thus accommodating the gender oppression of women within the class analysis. (Case 83)

Given Case's description of the way in which economics affect woman's oppression, we are able to better understand why many British feminist scholars refer to materialist feminism as Marxist feminism. It is also important to note that a liberal feminism might agree that woman ought to be paid a wage comparable to a male worker, although the liberal feminism might not orient their defense within the greater framework of economics.

#### *Seeking Solidarity Over Separation*

There is, however, something very important that I would like to point out about the categorization of feminism, and how this act can sometimes push us apart more than it brings us together. I am not suggesting that we should turn a blind eye when we disagree with the ideologies other feminists. Criticism and debate allows us to further understand why we believe the things we do, and often can be most helpful for reminding us of our own convictions. It is my opinion, however, that we ought to treat academic discussion as a pacifist dance, rather than a battle, for female solidarity and feminist criticism go hand-in-hand.

I believe that feminists need to fight for solidarity (whenever possible) over separation. Therefore, we might look at categorization as a tool used to help us better understand and combat oppression, allowing for future solidarity on an even larger scale. Allison Jaggar proposes a similar plan of action: "my goal," she states, "is not the discovery of a Platonic ideal form of feminism and the



exposure of rival theories as pretenders. Instead, I want to contribute to formulating a conception of feminism that is more adequate than previous conceptions in that it will help women to achieve the fullest possible liberation” (Jaggar 5).

Gayle Austin begins *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* with a similar “note of caution:”

I want to express a note of caution about making categories too important. In compensating for a past in which political biases were generally not clearly expressed and therefore ‘invisible,’ there is a danger of creating a present in which political lines are too clearly drawn. There may be a tendency to pressure each individual to ‘take sides’ in order to be clear, and we may lose something in the process. (Austin 4)

The theatre serves as a great outlet for uniting feminists rather than dividing feminists. No matter what feminist theory you choose to align yourself with (whether it be liberal, radical, materialist, or some other form of feminism), we are all capable of disagreeing/agreeing with the way in which women are portrayed on stage. When watching a production of *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, a liberal feminist might criticize the fact that there are few female characters, thus providing less opportunity for female actors. A radical feminist might oppose the linear narrative structure that positions the story in a male-oriented form of language and story telling. A materialist feminist might oppose the fact that little attention is paid to race and ethnicity, and that Linda Loman’s portrayal does not work to deconstruct woman’s relationship to capitalist

society. Even so, we all can agree that the play is lacking *something* in terms of feminism, and this might encourage us to take steps to subvert it.

## PART ONE: SPECTATOR

To review— this book is about representation, and more specifically, about how female characters and the female body are represented onstage. In order to discuss this topic, we must discuss *to whom* the female is being presented— the spectator.

When we talk about the role of the spectator in theatre, we are talking about *reception*— the act of ‘receiving’ a piece of artwork and responding to it. The act of looking at a piece of artwork (in this case, a piece of theatre) is the first step of reception. We use our senses (sight, sound, sometimes even smell and touch) to experience the art. The second step of reception involves the observations and interpretations that we make about the art based on our sensory experience.

Feminist theorists interested in the act of reception and spectatorship question the way in which our socially constructed notions of gender affect our *ways of seeing* a piece of theatre. Many of these theorists argue that playwrights, filmmakers, artists (whoever is creating the representative piece of artwork) often assume the spectator to be male, similar to the way that our language uses masculine pronouns to represent the universal or the norm. As Jill Dolan states, “in North America, the spectator has been assumed to be white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male. The theatre creates an ideal spectator carved in the likeness of dominant culture whose ideology he represents” (Dolan 1). This

section will be devoted to explaining how/why this problem exists, and will theorize potential ways to fix it.

### *Language and Semiotics*

There are two main ways in which we *receive* a piece of theatre— through 1) *Visual Imagery* and through 2) *Rhetoric*. Plays (more often than not) involve a written text, a dramatic script, written by a playwright. This script, comprised of dialogue (words) is then presented to a director who *stages* the script. The director uses actors to give a body and voice to the characters imagined by the playwright.

Many scholars believe that oppression starts with language— or is at least perpetuated through language. My sister, a poet and *semiotician*, was recently explaining this very topic to her creative writing students. They had just finished reading an Adrienne Rich poem and were discussing the symbolic language in the poem— light symbolized the known, the safe, the good. Dark, on the other hand, embodied the unknown, the dangerous, the bad. As their class discussion branched out, one of her students raised his hand and enthusiastically shared with her that he, for the first time, recognized and understood how this imagery might relate to the construction of race; how the dichotomy of light and dark has made its way into our cultural and literary tradition with such force that we seldom stop to question it, and how the good, the light, is linked to white dominant culture.

Semiotics is all about the meaning associated with words. Words are just symbols (or signs), and they evoke specific memories, images, or associations for each person who encounters the word. For me, *home* is a brick ranch on a dead-end street, a massive oak tree situated in the exact middle of the front yard. The

word home evokes this image for me, although I'm fairly certain that it wouldn't for you, for the images and memories associated with words are specific for each person. Semiotics tells us that words are composed of a signifier and signified; the "signifier" refers to the "elements that compose the meaning of the sign." The "signified" refers to the meanings that are produced by the "signifier" (Austin 75). I find Michael Mark Chemers' description of the signifier and signified to be particularly helpful: "the signifier is the part of the sign that is perceived in reality: the utterance of a word, the wink of an eye, or what-have-you. The signified is the concept or abstract that is indicated by the signifier" (Chemers 45-46). Therefore, the signifier is tangible (the *thing*) as compared to the abstract signified (the *meaning*). And the written word becomes just as tangible as an object or an action, for the word can only exist through an "utterance" (as Chemers describes it), the poet's act of setting pen to paper, or through reception (by hearing or reading the uttered and written words).

Semiotics relates to the theatre for a number of reasons. Through theatre, the written word is transformed into the spoken word by means of the actor's organism. These words or signifiers— as written by the playwright, as spoken by the actor, and eventually, as listened to by the spectator— are layered with the 'signified' over and over again. Also, the staged theatre production is laden with signs that extend beyond the written word. Every physical entity presented onstage before the spectator is a sign: the set, the props, even the bodies of the actors, for these things are tangible.

Teresa De Lauretis also discusses this 'duality' of language (the rhetorical and the visual) in her book *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Although

this text is oriented towards film theory, her discussion of female representation can also be related to theatre. De Lauretis states:

Language, no doubt, is one such social apparatus, and perhaps a universally dominant one. But before we elect it as absolutely representative of subjective formations, we ought to ask: what language? The language of linguistics is not the language spoken in the theatre, and the language that was spoken on Plymouth Rock... In this respect, we should consider not only the question of internal speech in the film but also, reciprocally, the possible question of an internal sight or vision in language, ... both of which invoke the problematic of the relation of language to sensory perception, of what Freud called word-presentation and thing-presentation in the interplay of primary and secondary processes. (De Lauretis 31-32)

Through the theatre, language exists within the realm of rhetoric, the realm of 'internal sight' (the evoked visual images based on written language), and the realm of 'external sight' (the body of the actor and all other physical representations on stage).

Feminists examine woman (both in word and in image) as a sign, and attempt to better understand how the signified (the abstract) is applied to woman as a signifier (the material). What do we think when we see the word *woman* written on the page? What do we think when we see the word *human* written on the page? I mean to ask you, reader, genuinely. Think about how your conceptions of the words *human* and *woman* differ. Or, think about how your conception of the word *woman* differs from *man*. What we are doing now,

consciously paying attention to and questioning our language, is the first step to understanding how women are represented in the theatre.

Now, let us imagine that we are watching a theatre production (as spectators) and a female actor walks on stage. She is now the sign that we, as language-oriented humans, will inevitably interpret. We might make assumptions about the character that the actor is portraying. Who is she? The protagonist? The antagonist? What is her relationship to the narrative that we are about to witness? If she is a young, attractive female actor, we might expect her to function as an *ingénue* (the lover). Or, if she is older, we might expect her to play a 'mother' role. These assumptions are based on: 1) Our expectations about the theatre (we expect to watch/hear a story and we expect her to play a part in that story); 2) Her presence (she is there, on stage, so she *must* serve some purpose to the story); and 3) Her sex, gender, and/or sexuality (her relationship to the story will inevitably relate to her relationship with the other characters in the story, and her relationship to these characters will be heavily dictated by these factors).

It is also possible that her body, when presented before us, will act as a signifier for male sexual pleasure. As Jill Dolan states, the female body is often seen as a sign which, "when placed in representation, participates in a male-oriented signifying practice" (Dolan 83). We will continue this discussion through our analysis of Mulvey's male gaze and psychoanalytic theory, but for now, let us further unpack woman's representation in narrative theatre, as propagated by the dramatic canon and the realistic genre.

## *Realism and The Canon*

For many, art's purpose is to mimic life. This was at least the case for Aristotle, who coined the term *mimesis*, which can be loosely translated to mean imitation<sup>5</sup>. This, of course, does not necessarily have to be the aim of art. For the surrealists, art transports us into the realm of subconscious automatism. For the expressionists, art illuminates our fears about mechanized society. For Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal (two well-known political theatre practitioners), art teaches us something and encourages us to question the flaws in our own society. However, for many playwrights (especially those who write in an illusionary or realistic style) the aim of theatre is more in-line with Aristotle's mimetic theatre— theatre that imitates life itself; that creates relatable characters that we identify with and are therefore capable of empathizing with.

When the theatre attempts to do this (attempts to represent us) we have to ask ourselves, *am I accurately represented?* Has this playwright assumed things about me that are not true? Has the playwright made generalizations about the characters in the play based on material conditions<sup>6</sup> (like gender, sex, race, ethnicity)? Many of the plays written in the style of realism<sup>7</sup> do not hold up very well against these questions. As stated by Elaine Aston "the oppressive systems

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<sup>5</sup> Augusto Boal thinks that *mimesis* is inaccurately translated to mean imitation, and it is more accurate to think of *mimesis* as the process of re-creating something.

<sup>6</sup> See page 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Realism* is the theatrical style that spearheaded the "modern era" of drama. Playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and August Strindberg are known for writing works in this style. In his essay "The Sociology of Modern Drama," George Lukács discusses realism as a genre and claims that it is the genre of the bourgeoisie (Dukore 933).



... which characterize classic realism are further critiqued by feminist critical theory concerned with subject positioning and narrative" (Aston 38).

Patricia R. Schroeder's essay "Realism and Feminism in the Progressive Era" addresses this issue. She states, "It has become a commonplace in recent feminist theory to dismiss stage realism as fundamentally incompatible with feminist interests" (Schroeder 31). There are, however, various (and often differing) reasons why feminists believe this to be the case. Some feminists, Schroeder explains, reject realism "simply because they [see] its linear form as designed to reflect male experience exclusively." Others believe that realism "normalizes the traditionally unequal power relations between genders and classes." Finally, many feminists oppose realism for its seemingly objective voice, which can be "particularly dangerous" when it represents "woman as sexual 'Other' and excludes female subjectivity" (Schroeder 31). While Schroeder acknowledges that all of these reasons might affect realism's ability to call for feminist intervention, she ultimately argues that realism is a tool that might, when used correctly, aid the feminist movement. Realism's ability to create empathy with audience members gives it "subversive possibilities" (Schroeder 31). It might provide male audience members with a platform to see the world as a woman sees it, or it might allow a female audience member to recognize her own oppression. Furthermore, since realism as a style is the most "prominent mainstream dramatic form in American theatre," it might encourage audience members to come to the theatre in the first place.

I agree with Schroeder's optimistic outlook on realism as a style. It is important, however, that we as audience members realize that a realistic play does not reflect the world 'as is,' but rather reflects the world as the playwright

perceives it to be. Furthermore, I do not believe that the problem with realism lies in its style, but rather lies in its pervasiveness in the dramatic canon, and the fact that the majority of works included in the dramatic canon are written by male playwrights.

Many feminist theatre historians try to trace woman's exclusion from the dramatic canon throughout history. Elaine Aston begins her book chapter "Finding a Tradition: Feminism and Theatre History" with the following quote from Bryony Lavery's play *Origin of the Species*. Molly, the archeologist, says; "My four-million-year-old ancestor opened its eyes... and stood up... And I realized that what I found was a woman'" (Aston 15). Molly's discovery parallels the leaps taken during feminist movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, when women began to openly acknowledge the way in which they had been "hidden from history;" that history is, in itself, a male-authored enterprise. Nevertheless, many argue that the reason why we do not know of many female playwrights is because it was not socially customary for woman to write throughout most eras in history. The ones that we do know of are sometimes considered to be anecdotal by these historians: The Ancient Greek poet *Sappho*, the Medieval canoness *Hrosvitha*, the Spanish Golden Age playwright *Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz*, the Restoration playwright *Aphra Behn*, the Romantic moralist playwright *Joanna Baille*. While it may be true that woman have been historically excluded from the theatre (they have been banned from attending theatre performances, from acting in theatre performances, and from directing or producing theatre), we need to allow for the consideration that these women are not anecdotal. We need to recognize that despite the fact that their society discouraged them to write and participate in the theatre, they still felt the need to tell their stories, and

many other female playwrights might have also done so. Susan Bassnett's article "Struggling with the Past: Women's Theatre in Search of a History" argues this exact point. Bassnett states:

We need some comprehensive work on women's theatre history; We need to go back into the archive, to look again at what was happening in Europe from the end of the Roman Empire onwards. We need to stop thinking about the "exceptions" such as Hrosvitha or Aphra Behn, and look seriously at the contexts in which those women were writing and the tradition out of which they wrote, accepting that the small list of names we have could be very much longer. (Bassnett 112)

In other words, we must replace the question "*Where are all the female playwrights?*" with, "*Why don't we know their names?*"

Let us take a second to discuss how the male-centered nature of the canon might affect female representation and therefore, the reception of these texts by spectators. These male-authored texts often feature male protagonists, and as mentioned before, female characters are included only through their relationships to men (if they are included at all). Therefore, women assume the role of the *other* when compared to men who are portrayed as the center of representation. This makes it difficult for women to find characters in the narrative with which they can easily identify. Many of the feminist scholars concerned with the issue of representation comment on this predicament, including Teresa de Lauretis and Mary Ann Doane, but Jill Dolan does a particularly good job articulating what the female spectator's options are when attempting to identify with dramatic characters. Dolan states:

(1) If [the spectator] identifies with the narrative's objectified, passive woman, she places herself in a masochistic position. (2) If she identifies with the male hero, she becomes complicit in her own indirect objectification. (3) If, as Doane<sup>8</sup> argues, she admires the represented female body as a consumable object, she participates in her own commodification. (Dolan 13)

The last position described here, admiration of the female body as a consumable object, relates to Laura Mulvey's famous phrase: that "woman is image" while "man is bearer of the look," the *looked at* and not the *looker* (Mulvey 15). This is the central idea behind the concept of the male gaze, which we now discuss.

### *The Male Gaze*

Laura Mulvey's influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1973) emerged out of a time of changing political and social conditions that affected the lives of women, and consequently, their representations in the media, film, and other forms of entertainment. Mulvey recalls witnessing the "Women's Movement broaden out from a political organization to a more general framework of feminism" (Mulvey xxvii). This allowed for the birth of a new feminist movement that focused not just on activism (encouraging female involvement in social institutions, like political organizations, or other career-based positions), but on ideology (changing the way in which people define what it is to be *woman*, and deconstructing this definition).

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<sup>8</sup> Jill Dolan is referring to the ideas described in Mary Ann Doane's book *The Desire to Desire*.

Mulvey, a film theorist, was a pioneer in deconstructing the male gaze. Her essay draws parallels between psychoanalytic theory and the 'cinematic apparatus.' As Dolan summarizes, Mulvey suggests that this apparatus "mimics the identification processes that inform the male child's progress away from the mother toward the father and into the realm of language," thus allowing the male spectator to "identify with the film's active male protagonist and simultaneously disarm the threat posed by the image of the 'castrated female body'" (Dolan 13).

Let us take a moment to better illustrate the psychoanalytic concepts that are central to Mulvey's.

### *Psychoanalysis*

You might be wondering, what does psychoanalysis have to do with theatre or feminism<sup>9</sup>? Since theatre has historically been rooted in portraying truth and imitating reality (as Aristotle claims it should be), playwrights, filmmakers, and artists have all been fascinated by the motivations of characters: *why people do the things they do!* This question (why people do the things they do) is central to theatre *and* psychology (the study of the mind or *psyche*). Psychology, however, is not a perfect field. As noted by Gayle Austin, it tends to "look for universal patterns of development that apply across many cultures, but too often examines only white Western subjects to do so" (Austin 57). Furthermore, the

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<sup>9</sup> Gayle Rubin is one of the many feminist theorists who questions the psychoanalytic models of Freud and Lacan. However, as described by Gayle Austin, Rubin's essay "The Traffic in Women" (1975) posits that "in feminist hands, each man's theories [Freud & Lacan] can provide tools with which to describe the oppression of women and others in the 'sex-gender' system of a society" (Austin 44).

field has been historically dominated by male theorists who have “attempted to find some universal ‘essence’ of say, femaleness,” and have made large essentialist claims about women in their attempt to do so (Austin 57).

When we hear the term psychoanalysis, we most commonly think of Sigmund Freud, who coined the term and championed the movement with his publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. Although Freud’s theories were pivotal in the establishment of the modern era (which is often focused on expressing the subconscious of artists, rather than the conscious), his theories have also been (rather) detrimental to the feminist movement. As Jill Dolan explains, psychoanalysts have found “obvious gender-bias in Freud’s work, in that the female process of subject-formation is not at all adequately theorized” (Dolan 42). We can better understand the gender assumptions that Freud’s writing propagates by looking at a short history of his academic career.

Freud’s first two publications were essays on the topic of hysteria, which comes from the Greek word for uterus (*hysteria*). It is a medical condition that “dates back to at least the time of Hippocrates, when it was thought that the uterus became physically displaced from its normal position in the pelvis, wandering throughout the body to create symptoms in the various places that it inhabited” (North 498). It was therefore considered to be a condition specific to women, and her uterus became the historically grounded symbol for madness.

Freud’s writings on hysteria suggest that the condition, hysteria, is not physical, but psychological, based on a person’s traumatic origins or disturbing sexual experiences. In her book *Hystories*, Elaine Showalter explains that in Freud’s early work with hysterics, he attempted to “provoke hysteria by pressing the ‘hysterogenic’ ovarian zones of his women patients’ bodies” and used

“hypnosis to help patients recall early childhood memories he believed had been forgotten or repressed<sup>10</sup>” (Showalter 39). Freud believed that hysteria was caused by sexual abuse as a child and therefore hoped to evoke memories of this abuse using these tactile (and sexually abusive) techniques. He later concluded that “instead of remembering real incidents of incestuous abuse hysterical patients were expressing fantasies based on their unconscious oedipal desires” (Showalter 40).

Freud’s “Oedipal Complex” is perhaps his most famous theory. He posits that a child’s first sexual inclination is directed towards his or her parent of the opposite sex (a heteronormative assumption). When the child realizes that his or her sexual desires are incestual, he or she represses them. Sometimes the child’s inclination will result in feelings of jealousy towards their parent of the same sex, for this parent is permitted to sexually engage with the desired parent.

Freud’s psychoanalytic theories influenced those of Jacques Lacan, who insisted “again and again on the fact that he was simply reading Freud, that all of his concepts were anchored in Freud’s texts” (Robcis). According to Elaine Aston, Lacan’s ability to describe these concepts was greatly facilitated by the “science of linguistics pioneered in the twentieth century by Saussure<sup>11</sup>” (Aston 36). Lacan’s access to linguistic theory allowed him to better articulate the sexual stages that a child supposedly experiences regarding his or her “Oedipal” desires

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<sup>10</sup> Showalter points out that Freud learned these techniques from J. M. Charcot (a French psychologist) and Josef Breuer (an Austrian physician).

<sup>11</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure is known as the “father” of semiotics. As we have already discussed, semiotics involves the study of signs, which can refer to images or words. Lacan believed that humans differed from animals in that they were not governed by “instincts, nature, and biology,” but were instead defined by “desire and language;” their ability to “symbolize” (Robcis).

and identification with his or her parents (as initially proposed by Freud). He was interested in better understanding a child's process of identity formation. He theorized that during infancy, children perceive themselves as an extension of their mothers. However, as the child begins to learn how to speak (the "acquisition of language"), he or she enters the "mirror phase." The name of this phase is purposeful; it suggests that at this moment in development, the child will be capable of looking into a mirror and recognizing his or her newly formed "self," an individual, separate from the mother.

Lacan refers to these two stages as the "Imaginary" (prior to the mirror phase) and the "Symbolic" (after the mirror phase). The stages correspond to Freud's pre-Oedipal and post-Oedipal phases (Dolan 42). For a male child, these developmental stages also involve his recognition that he is different from the mother (who he formerly perceived himself to be a part of). He realizes that he has a penis and she does not. Through this realization (and his reflection in the 'mirror'), he perceives himself as "more perfect" than the mother and becomes "afraid [that] his alliance with the mother will cause him to be castrated as he believes she has been." The child, therefore, "rejects the Imaginary and enters the Symbolic realm of language, in which the father dominates" (Dolan 42).

Mulvey theorized that woman's representation in film was therefore tied to these *phallogentric*<sup>12</sup> concepts. Furthermore, since men dominate the realm of language, woman is both visually and rhetorically oppressed through her representation:

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<sup>12</sup> The perception that the phallus is the *norm*, or universal, and that woman is *other* to this norm; defined by her lack of the phallus.



Woman's desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can only exist in relation to castration and cannot transcend it. She turns her child into the signifier of her own desire to possess a penis (the condition, she imagines, of entry into the symbolic). Either she must give way to the word, the name of the father and the law, or else struggle to keep her child down with her in the half-light of the imaginary. Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker of meaning. (Mulvey 15)

Furthermore, Mulvey believed that cinema, like the theatre, is an art form that seeks to bring pleasure to the audience. This concept, that art's *telos* or purpose is to entertain (create a pleasurable experience), has been historically grounded by the Roman theorist Horace who believed that the theatre's aim was to simultaneously entertain and educate. Mulvey's critique, however, is rooted in the fact that the pleasure created by the cinematic apparatus is oppressive to the female gender. She cites Freud's notion of scopophilia (pleasure in looking), which is discussed in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*. He explains that scopophilia involves the "voyeuristic desires of children to see and make sure of the private and forbidden (curiosity about people's genital and bodily functions, about the presence or absence of the penis)" (Mulvey 17). The cinema, Mulvey argues, allows people to practice this forbidden desire, for the spectator is allowed to observe things about the characters that would be forbidden if they were to exist

in the real world. The camera might accompany a character into the bathroom, or might accompany a character as they engage in sexual activity. Since these are acts that children are taught are “forbidden” and “private,” scopophilic pleasure is derived as they are permitted to witness them.

Let us try to further simplify the concepts we have just articulated. Feminist theorists hypothesize that language and representation are greatly influenced by the conception that man is central to human experience (that when we think of the universal human, he is man), and woman is therefore forced to envision herself within this male-oriented framework. Psychoanalysts Freud and Lacan unintentionally helped to describe this bias through their male-centered developmental theories, and by creating these theories, they further propagated these biases. Cinema’s framing apparatus helps to illuminate this bias, for it acts as a metaphorical set of eyes through which we can see the world, and feminists theorists (like Mulvey) have noted that this lens reflects the male point of view.

I was first introduced to the concept of the male gaze during the second year of my undergraduate career. My professor forgot to pre-load a YouTube link, and upon clicking it, she asked us to sit tightly as an advertisement played. 15 seconds later, when the “Skip Ad” option appeared in the bottom right corner of the frame, she chose to pause the video rather than clicking it, for a teaching opportunity had fortuitously arisen. The advertisement started with a close-up of a pair of high-heeled woman’s shoes which were clicking their way down a New York City street. The camera slowly moved up her leg— a hairless, bronzed, toned leg— to reveal her tight black pencil skirt. The camera focused on the movement of her hips back and forth for a few seconds before zooming out to show the woman’s entire body. This is as far as the clip got before it was paused,

and I must confess that I do not remember *what* the clip was advertising, but my professor informed us that this was a perfect (and rather stereotypical) example of the male gaze. In this case, the camera takes on the role of a heterosexual male walking behind the woman, fetishizing the parts of her body that “he” considers to be sexually attractive. This camera (or, the male’s gaze) reinforces the idea that it is *okay* to observe women in this way (as sexual objects). The female character’s position (as the object of the film) reinforces the idea that it is *okay* to be perceived in this way, and might even encourage women to *want* to be perceived in this way. As clichéd as this example might be, I find that it resonates strongly with my own students; that upon hearing it, they are more capable of identifying how the male gaze works, and can see how pervasive it is in the media.

### ***The Power of Looking and the Resistant Spectator***

In Ann E. Kaplan’s book *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, she responds to Mulvey by asking the question, “Is the gaze male?” Kaplan’s question re-orientates the concept of the male gaze to include acts of looking outside of the theatre or cinema, thus re-framing the question to ask, *when we look (in general) are we looking through male eyes? Is the male gaze an inevitable consequence when the process of looking at something occurs?* One might argue that the very act of looking at something necessarily invites an imbalanced power dynamic to be formed. I, the looker, hold power over that (or whom) at which I am looking. I can project my own assumptions upon the object or person. I have the ability to form judgments; to assess value. I can choose to focus on it, or to place it in my periphery. I can choose to stop looking at it all together. We might use an

example to help us to better answer this question: *Does the act of looking inevitably give power to the looker, while subordinating that which is being looked at/upon?*

I am looking at a wooden lamppost through the window of a coffee shop. It appears as if it has formerly been painted white, but the paint has receded and the beam's original brown color is shining through. A metal lamp is attached to the side farthest from me, as is a sign for the coffee shop where I am currently writing. Perhaps these observations do not help us to truly unpack the power dynamic formed between the inanimate post and myself, for, as Immanuel Kant would describe, the post is a non-autonomous *thing*, and not an autonomous *person*. So let us shift our focus to the young man reading a book in the window in front of the post. He is wearing a blue baseball cap embellished with orange lettering, a grey shirt... and, if I might be completely honest, I do not feel entirely comfortable looking at him any longer to finish the description. You see, he has caught my eye. He feels my gaze upon him, and his reproachful look has warned me that my gaze is not invited.

What can be learned from this example? A post, or any object for that matter, is incapable of returning the gaze, and therefore, I am able to stare at it for as long as I choose. I can use my imagination to change its appearance. I can turn it green, blue, red; I can elongate it; I can hollow it out and imagine herds of termites tunneling their way through its interior. In theory, I can do the same thing to the man. His baseball cap has just transformed into an Abe Lincoln-esque top hat. But alas, I fear that I have scared him away. He is packing up, standing up, leaving the shop...

I have learned that there is a social component that has affected my gazing upon the young man: that it is socially inappropriate to look at a stranger for an

extended period of time within the context of everyday living. I have also learned that this man, an autonomous being, has the ability to return the gaze. His looking at me has upset the power dynamic that my gazing has attempted to establish, for I am now simultaneously the *looker* and the *looked at*.

When looking or gazing occurs in the theatre or cinema, this social component is removed. The spectator is invited, even required, to look at the actors. They need not feel awkward as they stare at the performer. And yet, as we have already discussed, it is often the case that the female spectator is rendered powerless<sup>13</sup>. Why is this the case when she is granted the position of ‘uninterrupted looker’?

Augusto Boal’s critique of Aristotelian theatre is grounded in his opposition to manipulative theatre. He defines this type of theatre as that which forces you to empathize with the (male) protagonist, so that you recognize his flaws (*hamartia*) in your own person. Therefore, as the play reaches its climax and the character recognizes his *hamartia* or tragic flaw<sup>14</sup> (usually through some kind of structural ‘downfall<sup>15</sup>’), you, the spectator, will also be purged of the *hamartia*. Not all theatre functions like this (this specific type of theatre is the system of tragedy outlined by Aristotle in *The Poetics*), but many works of theatre do force us to identify with the characters onstage by means of empathy. It is important to note that empathy is not a bad thing. Empathy is a glorious tool that facilitates

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<sup>13</sup> You might want to refer back to Dolan’s explanation of ‘subject positions’ allotted for the female spectator on page 21 of this book.

<sup>14</sup> Amy Lehman notes that this term might more accurately be translated to mean “missing the mark,” for it was originally used as an archery term. The protagonist’s *hamartia* can therefore be understood as a mistake (a moment when he missed the mark) rather than a character trait (a tragic flaw).

<sup>15</sup> Recognition and reversal; or *peripetia* and *anagnorisis*)

our pursuit of morality, but in the theatre, it can also act as the weapon that causes us to identify with male characters who subordinate their fellow female characters. Or, it might force us to identify with the female characters that are subordinated by the male characters.

So how do we, as spectators, use our power as 'uninterrupted looker' to question representation in the theatre, rather than getting sucked in to the experience through our identification with problematic characters? I do not mean to suggest that I know the answer to this question, although I am willing to share what I think it might be. I think we must assume the role of the "resistant spectator". Jill Dolan's book title *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* similarly encourages a critical spectator. We see the literary equivalent to this theory as explained in Judith Fetterley's book, *The Resistant Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Fetterley's resistant reader is the reader willing to start a dialogue with the author (or fellow readers) about the reality created by the text. Fetterley states:

Clearly, then, the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us... While women obviously cannot rewrite literary works so that they become ours by virtue of reflecting our reality, we can accurately name the reality they do reflect and so change literary criticism from a closed conversation to an active dialogue. (Fetterley xxxii-xxiii)

I believe that we, as spectators, need to be educated about the fact that we will not always be perfectly represented in the theatre, in the media, in the cinema, in

literature, in any form of art. We need to be educated so that we are able to identify when an artist has made generalizations or has propagated stereotypes. We need to be able to understand the historical context that frames the majority of oppressive gender representations, and to understand that although woman's liberation has made giant strides, these oppressive representations linger on. We need to be able to identify *concealed sexism* in the theatre and subtle gender biases. Finally, we need to be open-minded so that in our act of resisting, we are not dismissive. In other words, we must start the conversation and articulate our oppositions rather than shunning all art generated through patriarchal society. We must educate the oppressors so as to avoid future acts of misrepresentation.

## **PART TWO: ACTOR**

The first section of this book has argued that by educating the spectator about the potential gender bias present in theatre performances, he/she will be more capable of resisting these biases. It is important to note, however, that the spectator's participation is only the final (albeit a necessary) step in the process of creating a piece of theatre. This section, *ACTOR*, will address ways to combat gender-based objectification throughout the process of creating theatre, and not just the final display of the finished product.

### *Performance in Everyday Life*

Performance is situated at the crux of many converging disciplines. Marvin Carlson's essay "What is Performance?" talks about the varying (and sometime contradictory) definitions that make performance such a "contested concept" (Carlson 70). A traditional conception of performance might lead us to define it as the "public display of technical skill" (Carlson 71). This definition considers the chef spinning pizza dough with great precision and ease before his customers to be a performer, just like the actor, dancer, singer, or musician. The chef has a technical skill and he displays it to all his patrons, who, in this case, function as the spectator.

Carlson also cites Richard Bauman's encyclopedia entry, which states that all performance "involves a consciousness of doubleness, through which the



actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action” (Carlson 73). This definition echoes the semiotician’s definition of language, which if we recall, involves a signifier (the thing as it exists in reality) and a signified (the abstract concepts layered over that thing). Thus, performance involves an action (the signifier’s equivalent), and a mental comparison/ remembrance of that action (the signified’s equivalent). Carlson elaborates on this idea and concludes that performance is, therefore, “always performance for someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case that audience is the self” (Carlson 73). In other words, performance requires the Grotowskian model of an actor and spectator, but because of one’s consciousness, it is possible for a performer to occupy both roles.

If it is possible for the performer to simultaneously be the spectator, we must ask ourselves, are we *always* performing for ourselves? I have vivid memory from my childhood when my parents left me home alone for the first time. I wanted to prove to them that I had earned this newly awarded responsibility— so, I began to clean, to pick, to dust. I danced around the house, imagining that I was a movie star performing in a montage, with upbeat music playing in the background. When I started washing dishes, I remember wishing that my parents had a magical crystal ball that would allow them to see my perfected washing rendition. I knew that they could not see me, but I was performing none-the-less; and if not for them, then for whom? — Myself, I suppose.

Let us once again consider the definitions of performance that we have already laid out. The Carlson quote told us that performance is “always

performance for someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case that audience is the self" (Carlson 73). The very first definition of performance that we considered, a "public display of technical skill," would lead us to believe that in private situations performance does not occur. So, then we must ask ourselves, what is private? How does the private differ from the public? Are we ever truly in 'private,' or are we always observing ourselves as if we were outside of our own bodies? I believe that there is something to be true about all of these definitions, and would like to provide a definition of performance that directly relates to the focus of this book (which has discussed the topics of looking, making meaning, and representation). Performance is doing anything as if you are being watched, and I do not mean 'watched' in the literal sense. Watching might involve some sort of metaphorical awareness of an action.

Many feminist scholars have dedicated their careers to unpacking the idea of 'gender performance'. I, personally, find the term 'gender performance' to be almost repetitive. If we define gender as the "culturally constructed meanings that the sexed bodies assumes" (Butler 10) and if we define performance as "doing anything as if you are being observed," then gender *is* performance; for if we are a part of culture, we act as if our culture is watching us. Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist philosopher and author of *The Second Sex* (1949), once said "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." In other words, Beauvoir suggests that it is impossible to *be a woman* in a void (in private), and womanhood is something that is acquired after one interacts with society (the public). It is important for the feminist actor to be aware of the ways that she performs gender in her everyday life, because this will make her more capable of

subverting gender performance on the stage. Is she told that women walk or talk a certain way? Does she try to accentuate these “feminine” characteristics within the character that she is creating onstage?

### *Actor Training Systems*

Linda Walsh Jenkins and Susan Ogden-Malouf begin their 1995 essay “The (Female) Actress Prepares,” with this statement, stressing the importance of process-oriented theatre:

A feminist critique of theatre shifts the gaze from product to process: If the journey toward production can be liberated from gender oppression, perhaps the product itself will be so as well. Feminist innovations in casting, rehearsing, actor training, dramaturgy, and writing consciously use the power of the pre-production process to subvert or change gender socialization. (Jenkins & Ogden-Malouf 66)

By shifting the focus of theatre from product to process, feminist theatre practitioners openly oppose theatre’s relationship to capitalist society, for they are declaring that the final production (the part of the theatre making-process that makes money) is not the only thing that matters. It is important to note that process-oriented theatre is not meant to de-value the educational, cultural, and artistic value of the product (the performance); this is, after all, the part of the process that involves the spectator, and according to Grotowski, is therefore the part of the process that *makes* it theatre. Rather, the aim of process-oriented theatre is to liberate the product (the performance) from oppressive systems, and conjectures that focusing on the process is one way to do this.

Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf's essay discusses the power that the director or actor trainer might have over the actor in this rehearsal process, and argue that it can be dangerously manipulative for acting teachers to assume the role of "all-knowing guru" over the performer, who is therefore made "absolutely vulnerable" in the guru's presence. This power dynamic, they argue, opens the way to both "psychological and sexual exploitation" (Jenkins & Ogden-Malouf 66). Female actors are often asked to identify with "unhealthy gender roles, to search for self-revelations that are demeaning, and to yield personal autonomy to a potentially exploitive authority figure" (Jenkins & Ogden-Malouf 66). In other words, female actors are asked to emotionally connect with characters that might be subordinated within a play text, and the way in which they are being asked to make this connection (via their actor-teacher) might also be oppressive. Therefore, the process of 'finding the role' (portraying the character) is as oppressive as the role itself.

Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf's findings can be summarized in their following quotation:

All the feminist directors we have interviewed emphasize the importance of creating respect and a healthy atmosphere in the rehearsal period... Similarly, all of the directors emphasize a collective, nonhierarchical approach to rehearsal, giving the actress the power to make decisions, to negotiate, rather than telling her to let a guru guide her. (Jenkins & Ogden-Malouf 66)

In other words, the actor's autonomy and ability to create the role for herself is a necessary aspect of the feminist theatre-making process.

The oppressive actor-training systems criticized by Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf are those based on 'Method' acting<sup>16</sup>, an acting technique founded by Lee Strasberg. Strasberg-esque teachers ask the performer to "align with a part, to search for those self-revelations that are appropriate to a role" (Jenkins & Ogden-Malouf 66). As stated by Rosemary Malague, "Strasberg's Method is predicated on the notion that the actor can become sensitive to imagined (primarily *remembered*) stimuli in the same way he or she is to real stimuli, and that the truthful response on the part of the actor will, in turn, create a sense of verisimilitude for the audience" (Malague 37). This way of acting is the direct opposite of what enlightenment acting theorist Denis Diderot proposed in his *The Paradox of Acting*, for Diderot believed that in order to 'move' the audience, the actor must himself remain unmoved (i.e. the actor must not be overwhelmed by emotions<sup>17</sup>).

When I first discovered Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf's essay, I asked to meet with Robyn Hunt<sup>18</sup> in order to discuss what I had read. She, like Diderot, believes that the actor's emotions cannot be manipulated (for emotion is a response, and not a given circumstance). I started off our meeting by reading a

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<sup>16</sup> The Method refers to Strasberg's variation of the Stanislavski System. Lee Strasberg learned about Stanislavski's techniques from Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, who were members of the Moscow Art Theatre. These two theatre practitioners founded the American Laboratory Theatre, which Strasberg was enrolled in (Strasberg 13).

<sup>17</sup> Diderot uses the word "sensibility" instead of emotions. He advocates for acting based on imitation instead of sensibility. The actor must be an "attentive mimic" and "thoughtful disciple of Nature" ... "constantly observing human nature, will so prevail that his acting, far from losing in force, will gather strength with the new observations he will make from time to time" (Diderot 15).

<sup>18</sup> The actor/teacher who I mentioned in this book's preface, and who will later discuss later in this section as an example of a feminist actor-trainer

passage aloud to her, which I had found in Rosemary Malague's book *An Actress Prepares: Women and 'The Method.'* Malague's book is written in response to Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf's essay. It considers the "thousands of women" who enter into Stanislavski-based acting classes and the fact that "relatively little attention has been paid to the experience of the actress and, in particular, to the 'Method' actress-in-training" (Malague 1). The passage that I chose to share with Robyn was written by Elia Kazan, a pupil of Strasberg, and, according to Malague, "(arguably) the director most responsible for popularizing Method acting on stage and screen" (Malague 43). Kazan writes:

Two young actresses, apprentices as I was, did a scene. When they were through, they looked to [Strasberg] for judgment. He said nothing. They waited. He stared at them. His face gave no hint of what he thought, but it was forbidding. The two actresses began to come apart; everyone could see they were on the verge of tears. Silence is the cruelest weapon when someone loves you, and Lee knew it. Finally one of them, in a voice that quavered, asked, "Lee, what did you think?" He turned his face away... No one dared comment for fear of saying the wrong thing and having Lee turn on them. Finally, speaking quietly, he asked the stricken actress, "Are you nervous and uncertain now?" "Yes, yes," one actress said. "More than you were in the scene you played?" Lee asked. "Yes." "Much more?" "Yes, much more." "Even though the scene you did was precisely about such nervousness and you'd worked hard to imitate it?" "Oh, I see, I see," the actress said, getting Lee's point that now they were experiencing the real emotion whereas before

they'd been pretending. He wanted to real emotion... and wouldn't accept less. (Malague 43)

Robyn's reaction was as I imagined it would be. She shook her head and then started to beautifully articulate how one might critique the passage, beginning with the last line. "What Strasberg is demanding here is *not* real emotion— There is no human being who *tries* to feel." Hunt believes that it is antithetical for theatre practitioners interested in verisimilitude to try to conjure up feelings—for humans *don't do that*<sup>19</sup>. As mentioned before, she believes that emotion is a response. When emotion is real, it is because it is in response to something, like Strasberg's two young pupils who genuinely felt nervous at the thought at disappointing their "all-knowing-guru."

Hunt shared with me a story told to her by Phoebe Brand, a company member of the Group Theatre<sup>20</sup>. It was during the time when Hunt was working at the University of Washington, and Brand visited the department. Seated at a conference table surrounded by faculty, Brand told them of one technique used by Strasberg in order to help the actors "conjure up" emotions. While performing a scene, the actors would be instructed to leave the stage and take a "private moment." In this moment, they would attempt to achieve whatever emotional status the character was *supposed* to have in the scene by thinking of something in their past. They would return to the stage and would continue the scene— now emotionally churned up— and continue the rehearsal.

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<sup>19</sup> Robyn's sociological observation, that (outside of the theatre) '*there is no human being who tries to feel,*' is largely influenced by the writings of Erving Goffman.

<sup>20</sup> A theatre group led by Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, and Cheryl Crawford

“This was Strasberg’s illness,” said Hunt, “and it still controls young actors. My eight students (referring to her current MFA students) are constantly being told, through film and the media, that *this* is acting— this conjured up emotion—but it is not. Imagine what happened to Phoebe Brand in that moment offstage<sup>21</sup>.” Hunt has developed a term that encompasses her frustration with the camera’s influence over her student’s work: the tyranny of the close up. This is what stage actors struggle under— because they have completely absorbed the scrutiny a camera’s close up provides— even though a live theatre audience is not capable of such extreme scrutiny. Hunt believes that Strasberg’s Method is much better suited for the screen than it is for theatre. In film, it is easier to capture genuine emotion (i.e. emotion caused by a real-life stimulus), but it is seldom the case that this genuine emotion is instigated by the film’s narrative, because movies are shot out of sequence and the actor might get several ‘takes’ to reach the emotional state required by text (i.e. actors are given more time to achieve “that perfect moment”). We might think that the shot of the actor crying is instigated by, say, the death of another character in the film, but in reality, she may cry because the director has just berated her for taking so long to shed a tear. The spectator then assumes that film actors are genuinely responding to the stimulus of the narrative that they are in, when in reality, they are (most likely) responding to an outside stimulus. This is not a luxury provided to stage actors

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<sup>21</sup> I have put this section in quotations because several chunks of it are taken from the notes I was able to scribble down as Robyn spoke, but the exact phrasing might be inaccurate. As I have mentioned before, Robyn believes in the importance of paying precise attention to the words that we choose to use. I would not want to disservice her by using a word that does not reflect how she actually feels about something. Therefore, consider this footnote yet another disclaimer.



(who cannot “take a moment,” cannot re-shoot a scene until it is perfect, cannot disrupt the sequence of the narrative they are in). Furthermore, stage actors must repeat their action night after night, as opposed to film actors who only have to produce a single and “perfect” version of their action.

The Brand example (of leaving the stage to “take a private moment”) is, in my opinion, an egotistic and narcissistic acting approach. It involves the assumption that the interior emotional life of the actor is the most important thing onstage, and fails to privilege the actor’s body, or the actor’s physical connection with other actors onstage, or with the spectator. Therefore, one might say that it is antithetical to a materialist feminist approach to acting, which necessitates a group-oriented way of doing things.

So, if Jenkins, Ogden-Malouf, Malague, and Hunt all agree that there is something oppressive about Strasberg’s method of actor-training, the question might follow: what does a non-oppressive actor training system look like? There are several theatre groups that focus on creating feminist theatre, including Monstrous Regiment<sup>22</sup> and Split Britches Theatre Company<sup>23</sup>. Both of these companies employ non-hierarchical and collaborative strategies, where all of the artists trust each other’s artistic sensibility and work to collectivize their ideas. This sort of feminist system works for experienced actors who have been given the opportunity to nurture their acting, writing, and rehearsing skills, but it might be difficult for young or inexperienced theatre practitioners to operate within these systems. So the question remains: how to we train young actors,

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<sup>22</sup> A British feminist theatre company; worked with Carly Churchill.

<sup>23</sup> This feminist theatre company consists of Deborah Margolin, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and their production manager, Heidi Blackwell (Hamilton 133)

develop their artistic sensibility, distill in them a sense of confidence and autonomy, and enable them to make theatre that is simultaneously affective and non-manipulative? I will, in this following section, argue that one possible answer to this question might lie in my experience training under the instruction of Robyn Hunt, for I have found my experience working with her to be empowering. And when I compare Hunt's training system to the Strasberg-ian methods critiqued by Rosemary Malague in *The Female Actress Prepares*, I cannot help but to recognize how wonderfully feminist my experience has been.

### ***Robyn Hunt: A Case Study for Feminist Actor Training***

I want to tell you about how 'wonderfully feminist' my experience training has been, but there are a few terms I must define before doing so. I must let you know what I mean by *feminist* (if we remember Jaggar, Dolan, and Case's definitions, we have surely learned that the term is not easily defined). I must also tell you what *training* is; what we do during training, why we do it, etc. I will start with the first term. For me, feminism is about minimizing biological difference, and therefore, differentiating people not according to their sexual organs (or how their society's constructed notions of them based on their sexual organs), but on their inner qualities; their personalities. It is group-oriented in the sense that it encourages us to unite through our common humanity, but simultaneously individualized in the sense that it encourages us to express our deeper, more defining qualities.

The second term— (what *training* is; what we do during training, why we do it), which isn't really a term so much as an experience; a memory— is much more difficult to define. I will try to start by using a metaphor, and will then

descend upon a more concrete description. It's almost as if what I am supposed to learn from training can only be understood by standing on the most beautiful and 'zen' island situated in the middle of a lake. I am standing on the shore, not of the island, but of the land surrounded the lake on its outer-most side. I can see the island, but it's far away and the harder I try to focus my vision on it, the hazier the image gets. But I desperately want to be there, and so I jump in the water and start swimming towards it. Alas, now I am even lower down on the horizon line, and there is water in my eyes, and I am gasping for breath. I can see the island much less clearly when I am in the water, even though I am closer to it.

Matt (my husband and a more practiced pupil of Robyn's) has tried this very tactic. He's stood on the shore, admiring the island from a far. He's jumped in the water, and like me, has lost some perspective while struggling to keep afloat. He has recently made a most brave decision— to return to the shore and try a different approach. He has asked himself "why swim when I can fly?" And so he did. He is in flight as we speak, and although he is still very far from the island, he can see how miraculous it is as he approaches. With that said, I think it would be more fitting if I let Matt describe to you what training is meant to teach us. Here are his words:

The most valuable lesson I have learned in my three years of studying acting is the process of emptying. It is the first thing that must be done. Before taking action, before starting rehearsal, before uttering a word, the actor must be empty. But what do I mean when I say empty? Empty of what? It's difficult to define as one thing. It is an emptiness of ego, of physical tension, of expectation of how it's going to be, of self consciousness (that arrow that we fire

inwardly at ourselves and almost always strikes the heart). We must empty ourselves of all of these if we are to take our first step.

(Cavender)

What Matt is describing here is the pursuit of what Robyn calls “un-panicked emptiness<sup>24</sup>,” a concept that directly relates to her belief that emotion is a response and should not be pre-supposed by the actor. She often quotes a zen story, “you must empty your cup before it can be filled.” In other words, when you step on stage, you must allow yourself to be open to the stimulus onstage (dialogue with other character, your own movement, etc.). The actor should not panic when he or she does not *feel* something, for this lack of (forced) feeling will only aid the actor’s pursuit to be truly present. Matt defines “un-panicked emptiness” as follows:

It is relaxation combined with readiness. It is true, natural, and un-protested listening. It is a continuous process of re-stabilization. It is very much like balancing on a tight rope. Both “mental” and “physical” exertions are needed to stay upon it. There are times when you falter and wiggle upon the rope. There are times when you fall off it. But if practiced, the actor can learn to find and re-find the sensation of standing firmly upon it. (Cavender)

This is just one of the many learning outcomes that training is meant to distill in us, but I find it to be one of the most helpful goals (for it fosters a meditative spirit), and the one that requires the most resilience to achieve. Furthermore, if

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<sup>24</sup> Again, she has taken this term from Peter Brook.

we translate the pursuit of “un-panicked emptiness” to our everyday life, it might provide us with a gateway to rid ourselves of gender expectations.

*The Feminist Aspects of Training*

(1) *Actors of any gender, sex, size, and shape can excel at training. Training is non-discriminatory.*

Hunt’s actor training system is feminist in the sense that it is non-discriminatory based on gender, sex, body shape, or ability. A person’s capability to excel at training is not based on material conditions. The non-discriminatory nature of training was apparent in Suzuki’s foundation for training. As stated in his *The Way of Acting*; “The actor’s nationality is immaterial” ... “Most Japanese actors, whether their arms and legs are short, fat, or whatever, are capable of giving performances that might suit translated plays in quite another way. An actor however long his arms and legs, will appear clumpy if he cannot project a sense of truth to his audience” (Suzuki 5). This quotation shows us how “desirable” features differ between cultures. In Japan, long limbs are considered favorable, but Suzuki makes clear that a traditionally beautiful appearance will not, on its own, make one a good actor. Rather, one must master other skills in order to convince the audience that the actor believes his given circumstances.

I believe that Hunt’s variation of training has made it an even more equalizing process. There are, of course, laws protecting students within the realm of higher education (each student needs to be offered equal opportunities). “To me,” said Hunt, “‘equal opportunities’ is about teaching each student to his/her individual strength.” She recalls working with one student who really helped her to understand how this functions in the classroom, a student who had lost a leg to childhood cancer. Suzuki’s training is very much ‘foot-centered.’ As

stated by Suzuki, “One of the reasons the modern theatre is so tedious to watch, it seems to me, is because it has no feet” (Suzuki 7). But Robyn figured out a way to modify the training to fit her student’s strengths. This experience allowed her (and her student) to consider the aim of training, and to find a different form that could produce the same aim.

(2) *The actor’s physical well-being and emotional well-being are greatly and equally taken into account.*

Hunt and Pearson<sup>25</sup> have modified certain aspects of the training in order to protect the actor’s physical well-being and minimize the actor’s the risk of injury. For example, some of the “Suzuki walks<sup>26</sup>” that we work on in training involve heavy stomps. Suzuki’s reasons for the integration of foot stomping are rather spiritual: “In stamping,” he states, “we come to understand that the body establishes its relation to the ground through the feet, that the ground and body are not two separate entities. We are a part of the ground. Our very beings will return to the earth when we die” (Suzuki 9). Therefore, the actor has a tendency to extend this energy downward, stomping through the ground rather than stopping at the ground.

However, Hunt and Pearson have noted the physical toll that this stomping might have on the body, and therefore, Hunt tries to limit the amount of stomping that we do during training. She always encourages us to take note if

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<sup>25</sup> I have not had the luxury to train under Pearson, but since Hunt and Pearson have worked closely alongside one-another for several decades, I am sure that many of the things that I have credited Hunt for have been made possible through their collaboration with one another.

<sup>26</sup> If you are interested in learning more about these walks, Suzuki’s *The Way of Acting* contains photo inserts of some of them.

something hurts (e.g. a knee, a foot), and to modify aspects of training (with her guidance) if we do notice any physical pain. Also, she tries to be conscious of what muscle groups we work during specific exercises (so as not to over-work any particular part of the body).

Hunt also pays attention to our emotional well-being and is careful not privilege the physical over the emotional. Sometimes her eight MFA students will be working on several plays at a time. When they are exhausted, deep in the throws of tech week for a main-stage show, she reminds them of a useful piece of advice. “You are tired,” she says, “so work 100% at tired.” In other words, do ‘the training’ to the best of your ability giving respect to how you feel. Accept when something is limiting you, and allow that aspect to somehow help you.

*(3) The actor is given the opportunity to express his/her individualized and autonomous artistic voice.*

I believe that Hunt’s variation of training has made it an even more equalizing process. This is partially because of Hunt’s personal interest in pedagogy. I once asked her about this, and she informed me that she very much believes in education as a process that can bring out each individual student’s voice (she cited the meaning of the root word ‘*edu*’, which means *to lead out of*). In the second year of their training, Hunt’s MFA students get the opportunity to write their own “solo shows.” The process is intended to help them to become generative artists, and to experience the act of bringing a play to life from its very foundation (the script), while considering all facets of the process (directing, designing, and acting), for which they will also be single-handedly responsible. She said to me, “in that process, my goal is to help each individual writer find

his/her own voice.” I have said over and over again in this book that the actor-trainer must work to preserve the actor’s sense of autonomy. I believe that the very essence of the solo-show-project is designed to do just this: to show the actor that his/her own voice is valuable enough to warrant an entirely generative piece of artwork.

There is something else that I would like to say about this point— about preserving the actor’s autonomy— which I don’t think I have accurately expressed thus far. There is a sense of balance that must be met between this goal and the practical time constraints of a production. If all actors were given total autonomy and freedom during a rehearsal process, it is possible that range of differing artistic opinions would prevent the play from getting staged. This semester, we are working on creating an original dance— “The Half-Life of Facts”— which is inspired by the ever-growing collection of ‘disproven’ things that were, at one point, considered to be factual. Robyn encourages us to voice ideas and collaborate with one another, but simultaneously provides a sense of order to the process. There are certain times when she *does* offer direction to the piece. She might say, “let’s try out grid-like movement patterns in this first section,” and then we experiment with her idea. The opposite also happens: a student might provide an idea, and she might direct us in such a way that we are able to execute the idea. In other words, Robyn Hunt definitively wears the “hat” of teacher/mentor/pedagogue in training, but uses this position of pedagogical power to help us cultivate our own voices.

(4) *The actor is encouraged to “replace shame or self-consciousness (self-watching) with skillful action taken”*



This 'lesson' is directly quoted from the "learning outcomes" section of Hunt's syllabus for training. Earlier on in this book, I stated that "the actor must not participate in her own objectification." One very effective way to avoid objectifying one's self is to avoid self-watching. By doing this, the actor is able to focus on her role as agent of action, rather than as object of pleasure.

This is, perhaps, the most "feminist" lesson that I have learned from training. It is through the act of 'self-watching' that the female actor objectifies her own body. She acts as the spectator to her own action (think of Carlson's definition of the 'double-consciousness'), and when she sexually admires her own body, she invites the spectator to do so as well. Therefore, it is absolutely crucial for her to be inside of her own body, moving and executing action, rather than outside of her body viewing herself through the male gaze.

### *The Power to Subvert*

#### *The Director's Power to Subvert*

Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement edited and compiled an anthology called *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as if Gender and Race Matter*, which focuses on a director's power to subvert theatre productions. Subversion involves the "ruin or overthrow of something established" and in the theater, what is 'established' is synonymous with 'the canon of classics,' or, "plays that overwhelmingly favor male characters, male narrative, male bonding, and male views of women" (Donkin & Clement 89). Donkin and Clement's anthology contains essays written by feminist directors who outline potential strategies for future directors to try their hand at. For example Gay Gibson Cima's contribution to the anthology includes an incredibly helpful and concise essay

titled “Strategies for Subverting the Canon.” The essay considers some of the practical problems that directors might face while trying to represent new interpretations of old texts. Cima states, “to subvert the canon, we must examine the way we finance, house, rehearse, and publicize our revisionist staging, and we must think carefully about the reception of the work” (Cima 94).

Subversion, Cima tells us, is something with “no universal formula or combination of strategies” (Cima 94). We cannot guarantee that audiences will understand/receive our approach to story telling. Furthermore, there are some scripts that can be subverted more easily than others, and “sheer formal experimentation alone, such as interrupting a narrative, does not necessarily constitute a feminist directorial tactic” (Cima 94). With that said, here are some of the things that Cima suggests *might* help directors to subvert texts:

- Know the historical context of the show you are working on (what Rachel DuPlessis calls the “social script”). Can you “stage” the outside forces that influenced the script?
- Ask your dramaturge to help you research the cultural history of the play.
- Can you change the genre of the play; perhaps by parodying the social rules that influenced the original play script?
- Stage your play in a way that “raises questions about why the characters are represented as they are” (Cima 96). Cima cites Zelda Fichandler’s 1900 production of *A Doll’s House* where the opening tableau featured all of the characters represented as dolls.
- Ask yourself, is the play depicting a patriarchal representation of reality or “reality” itself?
- Explore “gender free movement” (Cima 98). In other words, direct your actors to move in a way that might not be associated with the gender of the character they are playing.
- Write “beyond the ending of romance plots” (Cima 99). Can you highlight the way a female character might have been socially manipulated to accept a marriage proposal?
- Consider producing your show in a non-theatrical space in order to reach a larger demographic of spectators— maybe even, ‘non-theatre-going-folk.’

- Be aware of the “hidden semiotics of your production,” the playbill, lobby, poster, “casting” of ushers, price of admission (Cima 101), for these factors have a large influence over the spectator

Cima includes more in her list than I have included here, but my aim was to briefly consolidate what I believe are her most helpful strategies. I am particularly fond of her note about paying attention to the “hidden semiotics” of a production, and I suppose that one of my main goals in writing this book is to encourage theatre practitioners and participants to pay attention to *all* semiotic aspects of theatre productions (not just the ‘hidden ones’). We must be aware of what are we communicating to the audience with what they are seeing and hearing onstage.

Elaine Aston’s *An Introduction to Feminism and the Theatre* contains the following quotation in which she urges us to pay attention to the ‘alternative text’ of a theatre production. This term, ‘alternative text’ is perhaps a more concise way to say ‘the signified’; the abstract meanings layered upon all things perceived by the spectator. In this quotation, Aston, like Cima, provides a few suggestions for how we might subvert theatre texts:

The female performer as potential creator of an ‘alternative’ text to the male-authored stage picture in which she is ‘framed,’ is made available for consideration. Those sign-systems which make up the ‘alternative’ text and might be historically reconstructed: the signs which are generated by the physical attributes of the performer (facial features, height, body size, coloring, hair, ethnicity, etc.); the artifice of self-presentation according to codes of theatrical convention (e.g. costumes, makeup, etc.); the ‘star’ signs, whether

professional (association with a type of role, style of performance, theatrical management, etc.) or personal (association with a particular lifestyle, lover, political cause, etc.); the gesture signs (style and systems of facial and body movements, etc.); the vocal signs (vocal range, techniques and conventions of delivery, patterns of intonation, etc.). (Aston 32)

*The Actor's Power to Subvert*

I find this Aston passage to be a great way to transition into a discussion of how the actor's power to subvert a theatre text compares to a director's power to do this. Some of the things that she has described here are in the actor's control, but other things are not. It is the director who "chooses" the physical attributes of the performer through the process of casting. It is the director who meets with the costume designer to discuss how the performer will be clothed. Even the things that do appear to be in the actor's control (i.e. how they speak / how they move), are sometimes micro-managed by the director. I have, for example, been told by a director to "push my breasts out" (I was playing a chorus girl in an undergraduate production of *Funny Girl*). In that instance, the director took control over the way I positioned my body (which is usually a decision made by the actor). What power did I have in that instance to resist the director's traditional interpretation of the musical (an interpretation which involved the use of young women as sexualized set dressing)? *Did* I have any power?

In an ideal scenario, a feminist director would a) not include such an unnecessarily demeaning representation of a young, female actor, and b) would allow the actor to have some autonomy over her own representation. However, it

might be helpful for us to posit some potential ways that the actor might be able to be subversive, even when the director is not doing so.

- In the same way that the spectator must be resistant while watching a play (like Judith Fetterley's "resisting reader"), the actor must be resistant while rehearsing for a play. The actor must consider the ways in which the character they are portraying might be objectified by the play text, and more importantly, the actor must be aware if she (the actor) has been manipulated by the director or her other superiors.
- If the actor wants to try to subvert the role by making clear and decisive acting choices, she might choose to experiment with this early on in the rehearsal process. For example, she might choose to de-emphasize a character's gender through the way that she walks (Cima's suggestion for "gender-free movement"). Or, if she is acting in a "period piece," she might try to assert herself using a powerful tone of voice, even if women in that time period were not socially permitted to do so. By making these choices early on in the process, the actor might be able to initiate a conversation with a director about why she has made the choice.
- The actor might try to look at the audience (if permitted by the style of the piece). This way, the audience no longer acts as the 'uninterrupted looker.' By disrupting their gaze, the actor says, "I see you looking at me. I am not an object."<sup>27</sup>
- The actor must not participate into her own objectification. In the same way that the feminist spectator ought not admire the objectified female body, the actor must not take pleasure in the act of being objectified.
- When a director has chosen to represent the actor in a way that makes the actor feel objectified (think of my *Funny Girl* example), the actor might want to voice her complaints to the dramaturge or stage manager. This way, if the dramaturge or stage manager chooses to share the complaint with the director, it might be more graciously received

I must confess that when I presented the final bullet point on this list to my thesis advisor, Dr. Amy Lehman, she wrote back: "this seems unlikely." I (begrudgingly) have to agree with her, but have chosen to leave the suggestion in

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<sup>27</sup> This technique (sometimes referred to as "breaking the forth wall") was employed by Bertolt Brecht in his Epic Theatre (a term coined by Erwin Piscator). By consciously addressing the spectator, Brecht believed he would be able to hold them accountable for whatever political or moral flaw he was trying to critique.

here none-the-less. My hope is that if your reaction is anything like Dr. Lehman's, you might also acknowledge the very real possibility that the traditional theater director might easily coerce the actor into doing whatever he envisions her character doing even if that action is sexually manipulative (like being asked to push one's breasts out). If she chooses to voice her complaints to anyone, she might risk losing her job, or losing a future job opportunity.

I most sincerely wish that my *Funny Girl* example was the only one I could provide you with from my own personal experiences working with the theatre, but unfortunately I have a few more up my sleeve. My husband once worked with a director who advised a female actor to flaunt her 'feminine wiles' onstage and as she was doing so he mumbled to her, "there you go...you know, something for the dads." On another (and different occasion) I sat in on one of his rehearsals for a production of *Hippolytus* in New York City. The director asked the group of female chorus members to try to seduce him [the director] in order to "get into their characters," "like Mary Magdalene seducing Jesus". He grabbed a chair from the sidewall of the rehearsal studio and carried it into the center of the clump of chorus members. He sat himself down on the chair and repeated, "go on, dance for me." There was silence for a few moments, until one actor said to him, "I don't feel comfortable doing that." Her resistance informed the other actors that it was *okay to object*, and so the other chorus members chimed in: "neither do I" ... "me either." It is a perfect example of a) an opportunity when it was necessary to be a resisting actor, and b) an example of how to be a resisting actor. The director acknowledged the group of women and said to them, "Okay, okay. We'll do something different then." It is important to note, however, that this was an unpaid gig. Therefore, the actor was in a position

where she did not to fear losing her job, which is one of the main reasons why in a professional setting it becomes increasingly difficult to be a resisting actor.

### *Concluding Remarks*

I suppose if I were condense this piece of writing into one paragraph—to provide you with a single and concise lesson that I have learned while researching and writing this book—it would be this: *action* is the feminist's greatest tool. Outside of the theatre, it is through action that change is made (social activism). Inside of the theatre, it is the active spectator who is able to oppose representations of dominant ideology. It is the active actor who is able to oppose her own objectification throughout the rehearsal process (think of the chorus member who voiced her opinion to the director) and the performance (the actor who replaces action with self-watching).

My last and final point is this: if resisting dominant ideology is our greatest tool for disrupting gender-oppressive theatre, it is essential that we acknowledge the important place that education might have in allowing us to achieve this goal. We must think of feminist education as a great chain reaction. If this book has taught you anything about feminism and the theatre (which I hope it has), I hope that you will share you knowledge and observations with others.

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