

GENDER PERFORMANCE IN SHAKESPEARE'S *TWELFTH NIGHT*

by

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ABSTRACT

Cross-dressing is a recurrent theme in Shakespeare's comedies, and the theatrical trend of gender bending casting has added an extra layer of complexity to performing his work. How does the gender of the actor affect the performance of a role in Shakespeare? How does it affect the perception of the role, and how can an actor utilize that perception to connect more fully with the audience? How does the female perspective illuminate hitherto unexplored elements of Shakespeare's text and characters? I was inspired by Orlando Shakes' all male production of *Twelfth Night* to research gender theory in relation to classical texts. I was largely inspired by Judith Butler's theories of gender performance, and herein use feminist and gender theory as a lens to view Shakespeare's work. I put on my own production of an All-Female *Twelfth Night* in which I played Viola. This thesis is an exploration of my process as a scholar, actor, and activist in the context of that production. It follows the journey from page to praxis, as I attempt to apply academic theories to live theatre. It is my intent that this will serve as a possible roadmap for future gender bending in Shakespeare productions, and to empower female theatre makers in that process.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| CHAPTER TWO: THE TEXT | 7 |
| Historical Context | 8 |
| Gender Theory as a Lens..... | 13 |
| CHAPTER THREE: THE BODY | 18 |
| Viola: Male and Female | 18 |
| An Ensemble Effort..... | 25 |
| The Male Element | 29 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: THE AUDIENCE | 32 |
| Direct Address..... | 32 |
| Original Practices | 34 |
| Audience Interaction | 38 |
| The Feedback | 39 |
| CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION..... | 46 |
| The Academic | 46 |
| The Actor..... | 47 |
| The Activist..... | 48 |
| REFERENCES | 52 |

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare has been the focus of my academic and theatrical pursuits for years. However, until recently I saw my options as a Shakespearean actor limited to his few female roles. In 2015, I had the opportunity to play Romeo in an all-female production of *Romeo and Juliet* with The Fern Theatre in Atlanta, and my world was changed. It occurred to me that there was a wealth of roles that I might play in Shakespeare's canon and the only thing stopping me was my gender. I was introduced to Judith Butler's theories of Gender Performance and I became fascinated with the idea of gender being a playable theatrical device. It is more subtly at play in everyday life, but I wondered if the actual theatre was the perfect place to test out those theories.

Orlando Shakes (formally Orlando Shakespeare Theater) planned to open an all-male, Elizabethan style production of *Twelfth Night* in February of 2018 as a part of their Signature Series. To balance out the casting, an all-female production of *Timon of Athens* was slated for their April 2018 slot. Budget cuts ended up preventing Orlando Shakes from doing *Timon of Athens*, and they instead replaced the play with a more modest 4 actor show. When I heard that the all-female production had been cancelled, I thought this was the perfect opportunity to explore the intersection of gender performance and theatrical performance. It also seemed to be a way to bridge the first two years of my graduate program on UCF campus with the final year as a full-time intern at Orlando Shakes. I contacted my professor and Artistic Director of Orlando Shakes, Jim Helsing, and proposed that I produce an all-female Shakespeare play for one weekend in one of their secondary performance spaces. He loved the idea and suggested that I do *Twelfth Night* and that it perform in March of 2018 while the all-male production was on in their main theater. It allowed Orlando Shakes to have an all-female Shakespeare production to happen

in their building during the 2017/2018 season and it gave me the chance to work in contrast with the all-male production. The interaction between the productions was limited, but it was nevertheless exciting to have an all-male and an all-female production mere steps away from each other within the Lowndes Shakespeare Center. My hope was that audiences would see both productions and engage in a discussion with me about how the text was influenced by single gender casts.

I was excited to proceed with the project, but quickly a question was posed: what role would I play in an all-female *Twelfth Night*? Viola is the leading role, but she is a female character. Would that defeat the purpose of doing an all-female production if I played a traditionally female role? I decided that Viola's journey in drag as Cesario provided a sufficiently complicated gender dynamic and decided to go with that role. However, the question of gender and casting permeated the process and is something I will discuss at length in later chapters. Indeed, gender was my guiding question for this thesis. I wanted to marry the discussion we are having as a country about gender with my desire to play more roles in the canon. As we as a country begin to question the gender binary and seek to be more inclusive in our language and practices, can we do the same in classical theatre performance? Is there something more to cross gender casting than providing more casting opportunities? Is it perhaps a way to question our beliefs about gender and sex? Does Shakespeare have anything to say on the subject? What does it mean for this specific production of *Twelfth Night*?

The question of gender and Shakespearean performance has been widely written about, in particular the practice of cross gender casting. I was largely inspired by Elizabeth Klett's writing on the subject, both her essay published in James C. Bulman's *Shakespeare Re-dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance* and her book *Cross-Gender Shakespeare and*

English National Identity. She was similarly inspired to research cross gender casting in Shakespeare after playing a male role as an actor. (Klett ix) She discovered that her female experience brought out new aspects of the role. She writes in her introduction to *Cross-Gender Shakespeare and English National Identity*, “in each of the productions that I consider in this book, the effects are similar, and I conclude that women’s cross gender performance has the potential to open up Shakespeare’s plays to new and transformational meanings.” (x) She examines the politics of women playing men, and the criticism with which such casting choices are met.

The other entries in Bulman’s collection of essays tackle a similar central question: “Does cross gender casting today signal an archeological interest in historical practices, or does it reflect contemporary debates about gender and sexuality?” (Bulman 14) They range in focus from Jennifer Drouin’s piece on drag and passing to explorations of queer theory to the function of entirely female companies. It is worth noting that everything I have read specifically addressing female to male cross gender casting in Shakespeare was written post 2000. Enough (female) artists have begun to break through into these traditionally male spaces that scholars are taking notice, but this change has only happened within the last 20 years. It is indicative of a cultural shift, and theatre’s attempts to either follow or push progress.

My work comes at an interesting point in this “progress” as we are living in the push back. As I write this in the fall of 2018, American headlines are full of (re) institutionalized discrimination towards trans persons, people of color, and women (Crary). The majority of my sources for this thesis were researched and written during the Obama years. My process is a reflection of the progressive politics of that time as well as the conservative reaction. It is inherently political and must acknowledge the impact of our fraught political climate. My body

as a woman and as an artist is politicized on a daily basis, and thus my work is inseparable from political discourse.

This nature of this production required me to fill many roles. For the purpose of this thesis, I'm going to discuss my roles as Academic, Actor, and Agitator as they relate to Text, Body, and Audience respectively. There are three elements of theatre, and Shakespearean performance specifically, with which I am fascinated: Text, Body, and Audience. I posit they are the only things needed to perform Shakespeare. You need his words, a body to perform those words, and an audience to 'behold the swelling scene', as Shakespeare puts it in *Henry V* (H5, 1.1). I have sought to investigate how these elements impact me as an artist, and how they are impacted by 21st century Gender Theory.

My process began in the academic realm. I did extensive research into both Shakespearean performance and Gender Studies, and I used them as a lens through which to examine the text. I first proposed the idea of an All-Female *Twelfth Night* in Summer 2017, and from that time until we began rehearsals in January of 2018, I was working on my initial analysis. I focused my class work on *Twelfth Night* for those six months and did a good amount of writing before we started our first rehearsal. This was the part of my process in which I felt both the most confident and the most intimidated. Academics have always been my strong suit. I'm frequently told to "get out of my head" when I'm performing because I tend to linger in analysis. On the other hand, I had no idea where to begin. The amount of writing and research done on these fields is extensive and overwhelming. How do I determine what is even useful? The answer I found was coming back to Shakespeare's text. I needed to narrow my field of study down to what was pertinent to this production and Shakespeare's words. The text of *Twelfth Night* was both the beginning and the end of my process. It was a jumping off point, and then the

foundation on which I would build my work. Theory added new perspectives. What you will read in Chapter II is my journey with the text and theory from this academic view. I trace the history of gender in Shakespearean performance from the sixteenth century till now and challenge the notion of Feminist Shakespeare. I explore whether 21st century gender studies are completely at odds with Elizabethan writing, or if there is support in *Twelfth Night* for a radical redressing of gender norms.

In Chapter III, I see my hypotheses challenged as I bring praxis into the mix. My focus for this chapter is The Body, and my point of view shifts from scholar to actor. I explore the impact of Gender Theory on how I portray the role of Viola, but also how our concept affected the rest of the cast. The ‘performative body’ is a recurrent theme in gender studies, so the rehearsal process gave me the opportunity to apply the concept to actual bodies.

Chapter IV deals with the final variable – the Audience. I explore the idea of “original practice,” and question how it can change the way we, as theatre makers and spectators, look at Shakespeare. I share the feedback we received from our audiences and discuss how the play changes when that final character is added. What excites me most about this portion of my process is getting to continue the conversation begun in those talk backs and challenge my own assumptions as well as those of the audience. This is where I take on my final role as Agitator. I judge that theatre is a form of activism and is most successful when it causes a debate. Theatre is all well and good in its iterations in the mind, and in the body of the actors, but I am most fascinated by how it pushes out beyond the walls of a building and into the world. How can it change the minds of the artists? How can it change the conversations had by the audiences as they drive home? How does it provoke palpable social change? Though my original intent was

not to create a piece of political theatre, I have come to the conclusion that theatre is inherently political, and this final part of my journey is an attempt to synthesize the political and personal. I have sought to lay out this thesis in a semi-linear fashion, following the chronological order of my process. It is a journey from page to stage to world to page again. To begin this study of 21st century feminist theatre practices, we head back to the words of a 16th century man.

CHAPTER TWO: THE TEXT

Shakespeare is first and foremost about the words. We do not continue to study and perform his plays because of his plots, or theatrical devices, or even the characters. It is the language that elevates him above his Elizabethan contemporaries, and all the playwrights that came before and after. My exploration of *Twelfth Night* began with the text and was complicated by reading it alongside modern Feminist theory. *Twelfth Night* is inherently a play about gender. Viola dresses as a boy (Cesario) to ensure her safety after a shipwreck in a foreign land, and she becomes entrenched in a love triangle with Duke Orsino and the Lady Olivia. Romantic hijinks ensue. Gender confusion exists throughout the play, but I want to begin with Act II Scene IV as a sample case. In this scene, Viola, disguised as Cesario, talks with Orsino about the nature of love and the inconstancy of women. It is full of dramatic irony, as Orsino rails about women's frailty while praising the beauty and wisdom of Viola/Cesario. Viola/Cesario challenges Orsino's assessment of women, indeed having the last word on the matter. It is Viola/Cesario that has inside jokes with the audience about her identity, and eventually decides to leave the conversation. "I am all the daughters of my father's house / And all the brothers too: and yet I know not / Sir, shall I to this lady" (TN, 2.4). I have often seen this scene played as romantically charged, with a kiss or near kiss occurring between "And yet I know not" and "Sir, shall I to this lady". Regardless of how it is directed, a shift occurs in the text, and Viola/Cesario chooses to end the conversation and leave. If it is read as a battle (of the sexes, of the wits, or otherwise), Viola/Cesario would appear to come out on top. How might historical context, gender theory, and cross-gender casting inform our understanding of this scene?

Historical Context

Before I can explore a contemporary lens of *Twelfth Night*, I want to understand Shakespeare's original intentions. Is a feminist reading of the play even possible, or is that an attempt to put a 400 year old round peg into a square hole? To answer that, *the* Elizabethan conception of gender must be considered. As Casey Charles notes in her article "Gender Trouble in *Twelfth Night*", the scientific understanding of sex and gender we know today was not the same in Early Modern Europe. "Renaissance scientist Johann Weyer, for example, states, "although women are feminine in actuality, I would call them masculine in potentiality", indicating a degree to which women were thought of as merely incomplete males, capable on certain traumatic physical occasions—a particularly tall hurdle or heated liaison—of springing forth a penis" (Charles 124). She goes on to postulate that although Weyer does not mention a man developing a vagina, it is the logical continuation of thought. One might assume that Weyer believed sex to be something that could be spontaneously changed under the right circumstances. It was not a fixed state – but something that might be altered. It is worth pausing to distinguish between gender and sex. This paper will go on to argue that gender is indeed a fluid state as gender is about presentation rather than anatomy. Sex, on the other hand, is biologically determined and represented in genitalia. Weyer's notions of a vagina magically becoming a penis is a fundamental misunderstanding of anatomy, but such misunderstandings were common at this time. The prevailing biological theories were rooted in Ancient Greece, specifically Galen's one sex model (Winn 28). The One Sex Model essentially states that men and women contained the same anatomy, but they were located internally on women and externally on men (Winn 28). This makes Weyer's theory make a great deal more sense. That said, they clearly believed in two genders. Gendered language and roles are a dominant part of the Early Modern social system. Jean E. Howard writes in "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern

England” that “the Renaissance needed the idea of two genders, one subordinate to the other, to provide a key element in its hierarchical view of the social order and to buttress its gendered division of labor” (Howard 423). She theorizes that in this time of great social and economic change, a clear distinction between male and female, superior and subordinate, was necessary to maintain some semblance of stability. England may have had a female monarch, but women were decidedly second-class citizens in Shakespeare’s day. There exists a tension between the one sex model and the clear gender discrimination of the time, but it seems that in practice, sex and gender were largely conflated. Women were viewed as imperfect or incomplete men, which gives a scientific support to the subjugation of women and insistence on traditional gender roles. Being “masculine in potentiality” is even more dangerous if you believe that a woman might become biologically male at any time. All the more reason to enforce a patriarchal society. We have come far enough in 400 years to consider the mirror image of sex and gender – that sex is set but gender is fluid, and yet the fear of women’s potential remains. All that is to say that discussions around sex and gender were going on in Early Modern Europe, but women were not included in those conversations, and their voices were not often heard at all. Elizabethan England was certainly no feminist paradise, but the mere existence of the conversation feels like an open door to explore the connections between historic and contemporary gender studies. A feminist lens might highlight women’s progress from the Renaissance to today and ask why that progress is so incremental. Furthermore, it inserts the female voice into a many hundred years old discussion in which we are only now being allowed entry. And what better forum to explore these ideas than in the most gender fluid locale in Early Modern England – the theatre?

It is well known that only men were allowed on the Elizabethan stage, and so cross-dressing was an inherent part of Shakespeare’s theatrical world. While rules of dress and

behavior were strict on the streets of London, the theatre offered opportunities for more gender play. However, this gender play is only in one direction, male to female. Note the absence of “actual” women in this equation. While the story of *Twelfth Night* is about a female presenting as a male, there were no women playing male roles. It was a one-way track. Biological women had no place in the Elizabethan theatre. Casey Charles notes that “Theatrical transvestism...arises out of a configuration of social and economic variables that must be distinguished from non-theatrical cross-dressing, though most certainly the restricted freedom of women plays a decided part in both” (Charles 126). Men dressed as women on stage and completely dominated the theatrical space. Out in regular society, men had little to gain by dressing as a woman, whereas like Viola, a woman on the streets of London was perhaps safer in breeches. Furthermore, she might have access to jobs or other opportunities if she presented as a man. Non-theatrical cross-dressing was illegal so that women might be kept from those opportunities, just as theatrical cross-dressing was law so that women would be kept from performing. The laws regarding transvestism managed to cut women both ways.

Why were women still banned from the stage in England when female actors existed on the continent? Scholars have posited that “boy actors, by arousing homoerotic passions for the predominantly male audience in late-sixteenth-century England, presented an unthreatening version of female erotic power” (Charles 126). That is to say, it was less troubling to put men in dresses and have them kiss one another than to allow a woman to explore the kind of liberty the theatre affords. Theatres were (and often are) full of bawdy humor, alcohol, and transgressive ideas. Ostensibly, women needed to be protected from the licentious ways of the theatre, and it was in everyone’s best interest to keep them off stage. Contemporary interpretations of Act II, Scene IV often play with the potential homosexual energy between Orsino and Cesario, made

safe by the audience's knowledge that Viola is in fact female. We laugh at the "no homo" discomfort Orsino feels, but I contend that this reading of the scene highlights a contemporary homophobia more pronounced than that of the Elizabethan audience. There is no text in this scene to support that Orsino is uneasy about his attraction to Cesario, but that is how I have always seen that scene played. I am used to a contemporary interpretation with homophobic underpinnings – a discomfort with a possible love connection between two male presenting beings. Or that Orsino is unsure what to do with these "gay" feelings arising inside, and he must fight against them. On the contrary, Orsino is complimentary of Cesario. It is the woman that he loves, and women in general that are denigrated. It is not the male sexual drive that is critiqued, but that of women. Orsino recommends that Cesario find a young woman to love, "For women are as roses, whose fair flower / Being once display'd, doth fall that very hour." Cesario/Viola laments in response "And so they are: alas that they are so / To die even when they to perfection grow." (TN, 2.4) That is to say women are sexually attractive and valued in their virginal state, but once they are "deflowered," they are no longer perfect. The "little death" of sexual satisfaction relegates them to one or the other side of a strict Madonna/whore dichotomy. In either case, the sexual act is the beginning of the end of a woman, but merely a casual game for men. I think that in an Elizabethan reading of this text, misogyny rules the hour, not homophobia. When the women are away, the men will play. The absence of women in the Elizabethan theatre becomes obvious in this context. I might argue that the injection of female bodies into contemporary productions of *Twelfth Night* is the impetus for a switch to homophobic jokes and away from misogynistic ones. Misogyny still has a stronghold in modern culture, particularly in the entertainment industry. One need look no further than the TimesUp Movement and revelations of sexual misconduct in the highest levels of American business and

government to see the continued struggle of women in the 21st century. I would argue however that the presence of female bodies also leads to an increasingly fragile masculinity. In turn, a destabilized sexuality takes the brunt of the jokes. Contemporary audiences are not unfamiliar with a joke at the expense of women, but nothing brings the house down like casual homophobia.

Scholars regularly debate the purpose of Shakespeare's gender bending heroines. Was this merely a vehicle for comedy, or was it pushing social boundaries? He uses the device in a number of his comedies, though there is always a re-establishment of the woman in her female role by the end of the play. The chaos of a woman functioning in the land of men cannot stand. Everyone is restored to their appropriate gender norm before the final curtain, and therefore the audience can rest easy. Howard suggests that in *Twelfth Night* "the play shows that while cross-dressing can cause semiotic and sexual confusion, and therefore is to be shunned, it is not truly a problem for the social order if "the heart" is untouched, or, put another way, if not accompanied by the political desire for a redefinition of female rights and powers and a dismantling of a hierarchical gender system" (432). The intention of the cross-dressing is comedy, not a political statement. It is a micro versus macro conception of women. On an individual level, a woman may go on this journey, and even enlighten a man or two along the way, but Shakespeare dare not suggest that this is appropriate behavior for other women. One woman may be fair and virtuous, but women are not to be trusted. Orsino says that "Their love may be call'd appetite, / No motion of the liver, but the palate, / That suffer surfeit, cloyment, and revolt" (Act II. Scene IV). There may be room for a feminist take on characters like Viola, but it is not well founded in the Elizabethan model. I also don't think that Shakespeare was out to champion a feminist cause or make any revolutionary political statements. Cross-dressing was a popular comedic trope and Shakespeare made good money off of such comedies. That said, he wrote dynamic female

characters and dialogue that look new and different in a modern light. It may not be the original intention, but I argue that *Twelfth Night* is ripe for reframing.

Gender Theory as a Lens

Contemporary Gender Theory offers a path for a new interpretation. Feminist scholar Judith Butler is best known for her 1990 book, *Gender Trouble*, which explores her theories on gender performance, however this idea was first postulated in her 1988 essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” In it she writes, “Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 519). Then gender is something that is rehearsed and played like a role for the stage. It is not innate, but a socially agreed upon mask that is performed daily. *Twelfth Night* is an accidental defense of this theory, 500 years before Butler. Viola is male as she is Cesario because she performs him so, just as she is female as she is Viola because of her female performance. As Butler says, “To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman’, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (Butler 522). I am interested in the ease with which Shakespeare’s heroines pass as male. Might that not be an unintentional metaphor for the fragility of the gender binary and gender roles? Orsino spends much of the scene describing how different men are from women, but Viola’s presentation as Cesario refutes that argument. All she has to do is take on the countenance and carriage of a man, and she is male. Viola tells Orsino that “I am all the daughters of my father’s house / And all the brothers too.” This is a radical statement if we are examining the scene under a lens of gender

theory. She is not only insinuating that her gender presentation is false, but that she can exist as both male and female in the same moment. Those distinctions have become meaningless.

Charles suggests that the reunification of Viola and Sebastian at the end of the play re-asserts the notion that such classifications are insignificant. “If the major portion of Shakespeare’s plot employs the tropes of performance to show how gender is a melodramatic act rather than an inherent trait of the individuated ego, the ending of the play reaffirms this conclusion by producing a male that is, for all intents and purposes, the same or identical to a female” (139).

Viola believes Sebastian to be dead when she says that she is all the daughters and all the brothers of her father’s house, but when he is revealed to be alive, he has been in a way replaced by Cesario. Sebastian is able to slip into the role that Cesario has played in Olivia’s affections because he is essentially the same person. It isn’t the gender of Viola/Cesario/Sebastian that has attracted Olivia, but the personality- the twin soul residing in the siblings. A successful production might relish in the farce of gender as much as the farcical plot by the time the curtain goes down.

If the text of *Twelfth Night* is already full of gender confusion and complication, why layer in an all-female cast? Why not simply inverse the genders? We are in a time and place in which audiences are more willing than ever to accept the idea of performative gender. If the success of shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* tells us anything, it is that gender play is an acceptable form of entertainment. So much so, in fact, that Gemma Miller writes, “twenty-first century audiences are conditioned to see male cross-dressing with a double vision that acknowledges the body of the male actor while simultaneously accepting the illusion of the female character. It has become so entrenched in the cultural psyche, that it has almost lost its ability to provoke and disturb” (Miller 8). However, the inverse is not necessarily true. Female to

male drag is still confusing. Can a successful female to male performance have the same “double vision” effect without the cultural touchstones we have in male to female drag performance? Critics have argued that in co-ed productions, “whatever the director’s intent, a woman playing a man among men playing men calls attention to the gap between actor and character” (Tiffany 121). I have seen co-ed productions of Shakespeare with women in roles written for men that have worked, but I understand her point. The Brechtian distancing created by a clearly female body in a male role being addressed by male pronouns might be too confusing to some audiences. She advocates instead for changing the gender of the characters or having an all-female cast. “I personally was reminded of my matriculation in an all-girls’ school, where, in the absence of males, our qualities of character and personality were made visible and, for the first and last time, genderless” (Tiffany 132). That is an exciting proposition- that in a single gender environment, gender loses meaning. It also points to a continuing battle with misogyny – that women must be presented only alongside other women, lest their voice and presence be swallowed by men. I find it troublesome that a single gender cast must be presented to illuminate the tenuous nature of gender, but perhaps it benefitted me for this production.

It was my hope with this production of *Twelfth Night* that if all the actors were of one gender, that the scripted gender of the characters would be as easily accepted as any other stage convention. How revolutionary would it be if gender was seen as flimsy or theatrical as a painted flat? Moreover, “unisex casting brings us full-circle to the unisex productions of Shakespeare’s time. At the same time – paradoxically – it puts us on the other side of the Globe” (Tiffany 132). Single gender casting is in the very DNA of Shakespeare, it is high time that gender is female.

I am fascinated by what women bring to his male characters. Shakespeare is widely heralded for his universal stories and characters, but that “universality” has not been explored by

all female casts until relatively recently. Elizabeth Klett has written extensively about cross-gender casting at The Globe in the past twenty years. In her article, “Re-dressing the Balance: All-Female Shakespeare at the Globe,” she writes, “particularly in the highly charged performative space of The Globe, these male characters that seem so thoroughly familiar to modern audiences can become defamiliarized through the actresses’ bold portrayals” (168). It’s exciting to me that the voice and body and experiences of a woman can shed new light on characters that men have mined for 400 years. Gender may be a construct, but it is one that has very real implications in the lives of those who identify/present as female. Acknowledging the inaccuracy of the binary is just a step towards deconstructing the patriarchy. As a society, we still have a long way to go before we have rooted out the misogynist underpinnings of our culture. Therefore, women are going to have a unique take on a text that was written by a man, for male performers, for a predominantly male audience. Our perspective does not exist in the play as it was written, and so we are going to have to find new meanings. What story is told when a woman dressed as a man tells a woman dressed as a woman dressed as a man that “no woman’s heart / So big, to hold so much; they lack retention”? (TN, 2.4) Is it possible to make that read as more than “wink wink, nudge nudge”?

The obvious choice is a critique of the male perspective. The idea of “mansplaining” – when a man describes something to a woman of which she has a full understanding. A more subtle interpretation might be exploring internal misogyny. What narratives have women heard over and over again that have informed their opinion of themselves? How many times have we seen women self-deprecate or denigrate other women? Or perhaps with two female bodies onstage, we can see Viola’s internal struggle played out as dialogue. Viola has previously lamented the delicate nature of women:

How easy is it for the proper false
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms!
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we
For such as we are made of, such we be. (TN, 2.2)

In this scene we see her argue against her own assessment of women as well as Orsino's. When he protests, "There is no woman's sides / Can bide the beating of so strong a passion / As love doth give my heart", Viola responds with "In faith, they are as true of heart as we". The word "We" takes on a special multi-meaning here. "We" as in two male presenting characters, "We" as a male character and a female character, "We" as two female actors, and perhaps "We" as the dual identities that make up Viola. Viola is acknowledging the malleable nature of all hearts, not just those of women. A female bodied Orsino holds up a mirror to the female bodied Viola in a way that a co-ed cast cannot.

Indeed, the body is key to transitioning from an academic assessment of theory, to a practical application on the stage. All this theory is exciting and provoking, but it means little if it cannot be made manifest in the body of the actor. I spent a lot of time researching and writing in the time leading up to rehearsals, but I was unsure how all of that would translate into praxis. Gender theory is only just now crossing over from academia into the social consciousness, and I was fascinated to see how it might be applied to a group of performers, and how an audience would respond.

CHAPTER THREE: THE BODY

The body was my focus as we began the rehearsal process. There is a wealth of academic applications of Judith Butler's Gender Theory to *Twelfth Night*, but it is the practical application of her theory to an acting performance that is the heart of my work. Butler makes it clear in her writing that gender performance is not a singular event, but an ongoing process of semiotics. "My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler 523). One pulls from a set of cultural signs to create the performance of "male" or "female" that suits that time and place. The performance of femininity has shifted over time, but there are unwritten rules of what is "woman" that have been culturally agreed upon. She further argues "gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (Butler 526). I was curious, however, where theatrical performance falls in this discussion. Butler is using theatre as a metaphor for how people enact the idea of a certain gender, but the application is in daily life—or how daily life is its own form of theatre. But in what ways can her work be applied to the actual theatre? What does the knowledge of this theory mean to the actor attempting to embody it?

Viola: Male and Female

I started by examining the "gender trouble" the character of Viola experiences during the course of the play. After being shipwrecked, and presumably losing her brother, Viola asks to be disguised:

I prithee, and I'll pay thee bounteously,
Conceal me what I am, and by my aid
For such disguise as haply shall become
The form of my intent. I'll serve this Duke:
Thou shalt present me as an eunuch to him. (TN, 1.2)

However, by the time we see Viola in the company of Orsino, he is dressed as a boy. Orsino calls him “dear lad” (TN, 1.4). We don’t know why the plan was changed from dressing as a eunuch to dressing as a male page, but from this point through the end of the play, Viola is in male attire. In *Crossing Gender in Shakespeare: Feminist Psychoanalysis and the Difference within*, James Stone writes, “Although Viola opts for the disguise of a page, her initial choice of posing as a eunuch reflects more accurately the sexual indecision (and impotence) that her attire cloaks, in that a eunuch is neither a fully equipped male, or a female” (28). Before we started rehearsing the role, I was fascinated with this interpretation, because it seemed that Viola is never fully comfortable with her male persona. She says “Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness” (TN, 2.2). She doesn’t embrace the opportunities that a male presentation offers Portia or Rosalind. The character of Cesario solves an immediate problem- that of being a woman alone in a strange land, but it soon creates a new dilemma. She becomes firmly entrenched in a love triangle with Orsino and Olivia. “Her masculine clothing straitjackets her in this intermediate crux, double bound to unsatisfying alternatives whichever way she turns” (Stone 25). The clothing is certainly a component, but it is the entire performance of Cesario that limits Viola’s actions. This is a fascinating reversal of gender expectations. The very presentation that frees Portia to practice law binds Viola to a role beneath her station and removes even the limited sexual agency she held as a woman. On the page, I saw Cesario as an unsuccessful gender performance. As a version of her brother Sebastian, Viola is never deluded into thinking she is a man. Cesario appeared to be a placeholder- not a fully realized identity.

It was clear that Viola must put on a successful enough male performance for the other characters in the play. Stone writes that “she is repeatedly reminded of the defects in her male interpretation” (30). I disagree with him on that point. Feste notices that something about her is

amiss: “Who you are and what you would are out of my welkin” (TN, 3.1), but it is the nature of Shakespeare’s wise fools to have that kind of preternatural knowledge. Viola flirts with the reality of her identity to both Orsino and Olivia on various occasions. She can’t help telling Olivia, “I am not what I am” (TN, 3.1), but she is not believed. The performance of Cesario must be convincing enough that when the “real” Cesario, i.e. Sebastian, appears, they believe him to be the same person.

It was my hypothesis that this dilemma is a matrix where Gender Performance becomes a playable theatrical act. By Butler’s definition, a gender performance isn’t something that can exist within the two-hour timeframe of a play. It is something that is rehearsed in daily life and becomes a subconscious act. I think what the span of a play can do effectively is to destabilize the idea of the gender binary. If “Cesario” is a begrudging mask, we see that “series of acts” that Butler refers to as performative, rather than as inherent traits. It was important to me that Viola had a completely different physical characterization than Cesario. I wanted to play with stereotypical masculine physical and vocal choices that were clearly performative. My hope was that highlighting the falseness of those “male” signifiers would also call into question the “female” ones. I wanted to explore the idea that what she presents as “herself” is as much a culturally and socially determined mask as Cesario. I assumed that Viola as “female” is easy to perform because she has been doing it her entire life. Based on Butler’s theory, I assumed that Viola had unconsciously practiced a feminine persona over the 20 odd years of her life. Just like the rest of us, she had selected the way she walks and talks and moves to fit inside of a cultural norm. My thought was that Viola would closely resemble my own physical habits formed over my lifetime. I don’t usually think much about how the way I move or speak has been cultivated

within a social construct, and neither does Viola, but it is a “female” performance. Cesario as “male” is difficult because it is foreign- it has not been rehearsed in the same way.

Voice, gesture, and clothing are all components of a gender performance. They are easy signifiers of sex. Clothing is chief among these in *Twelfth Night*. Viola wears her “masculine usurped attire” for most of the play, and it is the chief part of her disguise (TN 5.1). Unlike Portia, Rosalind, or Julia, Viola is surrounded by strangers when she is in this drag. She does not have to convince anyone that she previously knew as Viola that she is an entirely new (male) person. Her father (and presumably mother) are dead, and Sebastian is lost. She is in a foreign country where no one knows her or her past. Viola may take on some physical or vocal changes to cement her male identity, but that is not explicit in the text, and she is not necessarily required to do so. The people of Illyria see a body in male clothing and assume that body is male. “Two models of sexual transformation operate in *Twelfth Night*: one looks to textured clothing as the locus for reading gender, the other to textual inscription in the words that conventionally designate and distinguish the sexes.” (Stone 25) In *Twelfth Night* in perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare’s cross-dressing comedies, the clothes really do make the man. Orsino even comments on the fact that Cesario is a pretty young man with a high voice:

Diana’s lip
Is not more smooth and rubious. Thy small pipe
Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound.
And all is semblative a woman’s part. (TN, 1.4)

This has to be a moment of terror for Viola that she will be found out- but Orsino is not suspicious, simply glad that such an innocent looking boy will bear his messages of love to Olivia. This further suggests that all Viola has done to take on a male persona is to wear pants. Are our constructs of gender so fragile that they shift on the lack of a skirt?

As I look back at my writing before rehearsals began, and after we got on our feet, I had a lot of interesting ideas, but I didn't have a grasp on how it would all translate to the stage. For all the discussion I had generated about the semiotic body of Viola, I was living entirely in a theoretical realm. The actual body was not yet involved. Viola is often lauded as the greatest of Shakespeare's comedic leading ladies- an independent woman holding her own among Hamlets and Macbeths. But on the page, buried underneath these filters of theory, she seemed lesser. She read as inactive, limited, not fully realized. Her flirtation with gender play was not empowering but debilitating. She dresses as a man to enter the world of men, and yet still flounders. That isn't the liberated heroine I was looking for, but the butt of a 400 year old misogynist joke about the frailty of women. When we started rehearsing, I was at a loss as to how I could activate Viola in the second half of the play. She wasn't living up to the strong independent woman image I had of her before I started all this research. I assumed she was a feminist icon based on her status in the canon of female roles, then I assumed she was weak for not reacting to her dilemma in a more explosive way. I was alarmed by her relative silence in the final scene, and I judged her for it. As is my habit, I had become so caught up in the thinking part that I didn't know how to do. It took getting into the rehearsal room and letting go of all of the commentary to really find Viola's body.

About a week into the rehearsal process, I had a breakthrough with Viola and her speech in 2.1. I started to think more about her lines: "How easy is it then for the proper false / In women's waxen hearts to set their forms / Alas, our frailty is the cause not we / For such as we are made of such we be". This section has bothered me in the past because it feels like Viola is pushing the problem off by saying that women are just too weak to handle it – and maybe she is – but what if she's saying that we will be what we say we are? That is to say if Viola associates

frailty with femininity, she will be frail. If she believes she is strong, she will be strong. In this speech she's mostly talking about Olivia, and her womanish predisposition to falling in love in spite of herself. But she seems to take on this dichotomy in herself – “As I am man...” “As I am woman...” She is frail as a woman, but as a man she is stronger. That means that the frailty is a choice, not a given. Besides completing a nice rhyming couplet, what does “be” mean as opposed to “are.” I think it indicates an activity, an activeness. These things make up “femininity” and so I act in that way. I started to view performativity as active and began looking for instances where Viola uses active language when describing gender – it's not something she is much as something that she does.

We don't see Viola's introduction to Orsino. Shakespeare reveals their relationship *in medias res*. She is known to Orsino as Cesario, and her maleness is assumed. It isn't until she is in Olivia's company that she asserts herself as male, “Above my fortunes, yet my state is well / I am a gentleman” (TN, 1.5). At this point, she is confident in her performance, in her acting out masculinity. Perhaps in the presence of biological females, she is less self-conscious, or maybe she is just better practiced. Either way, in her initial scene with Olivia, her text is more active, and I was drawn to more aggressive, perhaps even stereotypically “masculine” acting choices. My image for that line was “to inflate” or “to bellow.” Other quippy lines in the scene had the energy of “slapping,” “knocking down,” and “kicking out.” Later, when she is overwhelmed by Olivia's affections, her identity, and her actions are softened:

Olivia. Stay:

I prithee, tell me what thou thinkest of me

Viola. That you do think you are not what you are.

Olivia. If I think so, I think the same of you.

Viola. Then you think right: I am not what I am.

Olivia. I would you were as I would have you be!

Viola. Would it be better Madam than I am?

I wish it might for now I am your fool! (TN, 3.1)

She might well say “I am not what I’ve done.” Her presentation switched from female to male to fool. My actions were now “to plead” or “to swipe.” I sought to escape both my own humiliation and the second-hand embarrassment I felt for Olivia.

The key to Viola was focusing not on how I looked but what I was doing. That is a pretty basic acting principle, but the fundamentals are easily lost when I’m also worrying about verse, style, and theory. It was easy to confuse a psychological understanding of the character and psychoanalyzing her. I found that it wasn’t necessarily important to know what gender Viola is trying to portray at any given moment, because Shakespeare has given you gender identity in the language. If I make choices that are true to the text, both that I speak and that I take in from other characters, the gender takes care of itself. It all comes back to those pesky gender constructs— notions of women as soft and submissive while men are strong and aggressive. Those aren’t innate qualities, but a series of actions, of acting choices, that carry a certain weight and impact. Even I assumed aggressive actions to be stereotypically male, when actions are genderless. Western culture traditionally assumes women to be nurturing, romantic, and sweet, so when a woman meets those expectations, we chalk it up to “femaleness,” not the specific qualities of an individual human being. The choices I made as Viola were more in line with our Concept of Femininity because of the Concept, not because of a conscious donning of a female mask.

It is a slight, but I think important distinction. I thought that I had to carefully choose male versus female signifiers in voice or gesture, when really, I simply had to trust that the audience would classify based on action. There are a couple of liminal moments where Viola attempts to really cement the idea that she is male, but for the most part, she is simply acting and reacting to the situation. I think that is what I initially thought of as a weak characterization of Cesario. After I started rehearsing the role, I realized that there is not so much difference

between the two. Cesario is a translucent mask because he is really just a pair of pants – Viola is “doing Viola” and the other characters (and perhaps the audience) read her as male because she is assertive. My mistake was in attempting to nail down a gender performance for Viola within the binary. Viola and Cesario aren’t really separate performances, they are just costumed differently. I suggest that she does not have a distinct female mask and male mask. She has a daily gender performance just like anyone else has a daily gender performance, but it wasn’t useful to dwell on that as the actor. Viola hasn’t read Butler, and she isn’t aware of the performance when she presents as female, so that wasn’t playable. Interesting to note, but not playable. Besides, wasn’t I falling into the same trap as the characters in the play by assuming her performance to be vastly different because of a costume change?

My conclusion had been that the audience had to see two distinct gender performances to understand that gender is performative. What I forgot to consider is that the perception of the performance is as important as the performance itself. In many ways, gender is in the eye of the beholder. I think the text of the play highlights the absurdity that putting on a pair of pants makes the world believe that Viola is male. Visual gender markers are much easier to dismiss than engrained ideas of how men act and how women act. The sub text, or my sub text, is that it is absurd that we view her actions while wearing those pants as masculine. As an actor, I had to focus on making those actions clear, and then allow the audience to categorize them.

An Ensemble Effort

My personal experience of performing gender is just one part of this production. Viola is just one part of a truly ensemble driven show. The implications of my research reverberated throughout the pre-production and rehearsal process. My main job in this production was as scholar/actor, but the all-female casting was my concept and I felt responsible for finding

meaning in that choice as well. I was inspired by the all-female productions I have read about at the Globe in how they address gender within a play. “The original practices helped to erase potentially unsettling concerns about cross-gender casting by encouraging the actresses and their audiences to read the characters, via their costumes, as male” (*Cross Gender Shakespeare* 145). Within our limited budget, gendered clothing was key to distinguishing between male and female in the world of our *Twelfth Night*. I hoped that having the male characters in masculine clothing and female characters in feminine clothing would help to clarify the genders of the characters to the audience, even though the cast comprised of only female bodies. It was important to find a balance of highlighting the artifice of gender, while also telling a coherent story. It is integral to the plot of *Twelfth Night* that the audience knows who is male, who is female, and who is in disguise- the costumes have to make this clear. I had no illusion that the audience will forget that they are watching a cast of all women, but I wanted the character’s genders to read as they were written.

If an agreement with the audience that women will be playing male roles as men is made, I believed we could open up the possibility to discuss gender performance in a different way than we do with Viola. “It is not only in particular moments that the audience is made aware of gender as prosthetic; rather throughout the performance, the spectator is encouraged to fixate variously on the surface and on the imaged body beneath” (“Re-dressing the balance” 169). I assumed it to be a less complicated layering of gender than Viola/Cesario, because it is consistent throughout the play. It perhaps makes the idea of gender performance more digestible, as it is more akin to modern drag with heightened interpretations of gender that call attention to both the performed gender and the gender of the performer. I thought this might be an opportunity for more commentary on how men perform masculinity on a daily basis. Viola’s

presentation of maleness is limited, but Orsino or Sir Toby Belch are in full body masculine masks. Gesture and voice could perhaps feature more prominently in their male performance.

My assumption going into the process was that there were two ways to approach the male characters- for them to “pass” as men, or for us to embrace a drag aesthetic. I think that we discovered an interesting place outside of passing and drag. The LA Women’s Shakespeare Company led by Lisa Wolpe was known for having female actors in male roles present believably as men. “They aligned their hearts over their hips, their heads over their hearts, and... a new voice and a new energy burst forth” (Avila). The effect is impressive, and a glance at production photos might convince one that it was a co-ed production. That kind of male impersonation requires a level of makeup and costuming beyond my ability for this project, and also seemed a bit beside the point. Why do an all-female production and then hide the female bodies? On the other side of the spectrum is an overt drag style- one that comedically highlights the female body in exaggerated male trappings. Drag offers a space for satire and political commentary that might well suit an all-female production in 2018.

What we ended up discovering, however, was that it felt disingenuous to try to put a “male mask” on top of any of the characters. I played some with my pitch when I was first introduced as Cesario, but the women in male roles found that stereotypically masculine voices and gestures distanced themselves from the characters. Leaning into a drag portrayal of the men detracted from the story and felt more like aggressive commentary on masculinity. *Twelfth Night* is not a play about gender identity. It is an aspect, but it is not the heart of the tale. I judge that it is a play about loss and navigating the ways of love and grief. It’s a comedy! This production is using Gender Performativity as a filter- a way to color the language, not to overpower it. Gender performance of any kind is a very sensitive and personal experience, and we didn’t seek to mock

or deride a traditionally male presentation. That would be a one-way ticket to half of our audience shutting down and tuning us out.

We had to find a way for the body to meet the language and the concept. Instead of trying to erase the female, we discovered a glimpse into a spectrum of gender presentation. None of the women bound their breasts or hips, some wore fake mustaches, some wore clothing tailored for men, and some wore pieces from the ladies' department. We counted on the audience being able to follow along with the designated pronouns of each character, and then to not worry if the body in front of them matched their concept of that pronouns. For me, that is much more exciting and revolutionary than either of the options I thought we might explore, because it pushes back against the idea of a binary. The options aren't just male or female, or even a dead center androgyny. There are infinite points along a gender spectrum, and where better to explore that liminal space than the theatre? In this way, gender performance is like a stowaway in the brain of the viewer. The gender presentation of any given character isn't especially relevant to the plot (outside of Viola), and so we hoped the audience would simply accept what they were seeing and move on. If we were successfully telling the story, there wouldn't be time to be hung up on nailing down what was meant to be between these beings' legs. The romance and sexual tension of the piece is inherent regardless of the gender identity of the performer. Perhaps later they will come back to this question, and perhaps they will see that it doesn't matter much.

I think this process allowed us to explore this more subtle and nuanced exploration of gender onstage. To greatly oversimplify, the direction given in rehearsal was to find the body, gesture, and voice of the character as each actor saw fit. They were tasked with finding the truth of that character through their own lens of experience just as they would in any other play. The final presentation of each character was an expression of their personal gender presentation

mixed with whatever felt appropriate for the characters' objectives. Especially because we were working with a largely student cast, the goal was to be grounded, connected, and clear above all else. This group of 13 bodies will never again be in that space, performing those words, and it became clear that what we wanted to see was their heart, not their body mask. In this way, I think my journey with Viola, and the journey of the rest of the cast ended up in a very similar place. Instead of pinpointing a gender presentation, we put the focus on action. Stereotypes are easily played, but at what benefit to the performance?

The Male Element

I would be remiss to neglect to acknowledge the other question of body and gender that lived in the rehearsal room. The cast, design, and stage management team were all female, but we had a male director- Chris Rushing. Chris was chosen for a number of reasons, not the least of which being he has experience directing all female Shakespeare. We also were mirroring the OST production model, which had a female director and an all-male cast. Finally, Chris is my husband, and was willing to volunteer his time. A tension exists here on several levels. There is the initial question of a male body in a female space, but there is also the potential conflict of interest in that the male body is that of my husband. It complicated our discussion as producer and director, and also complicates the relationships in the rehearsal hall. Chris maintains that in his experience working with both single gender casts and co-ed casts that treating everyone with respect and encouraging collaboration regardless of sex, age, etc. creates the optimal rehearsal environment. I acknowledge that I cannot be unbiased in a discussion of comfortability, but I would argue that the fact that he was my husband helped to remove some gendered preconceptions for the cast- he was a "safe man", trusted by association. I do think that another male director would have been less welcomed. Chris' willingness to be emotionally vulnerable

and to constantly assess his own presentation of masculinity encouraged the cast to let go of some of their expectations for a male director. The cast started calling him “Dad” at some point during the process, which I see as the ultimate familial stamp of approval. As an actor and the producer, it was sometimes a challenge to be married to the director, and to have to navigate our personal and professional relationships. It was also a struggle to navigate my role as producer with my role as actor. It required a constant awareness of the power balance, and a great deal of communication. My role within the context of rehearsal was that of an actor, and the director is leading the process in that space. I deferred to him in rehearsals, and I tried to keep any disagreements as discussions for the car ride home. I think we managed to keep our roles as husband and wife separate from our roles as director and actor and those as director and producer, respectively.

While I understand the optics of an all-male director and an all-female cast are questionable, particularly in a time of #MeToo and #TimesUp (Langone), it was also important to me to have a male voice in the process. The goal of my work is not to exclude the male perspective, but to put the spotlight on the female. I’m troubled by the idea that for women to have a voice that they must be set apart from men wholesale. Is that not also a kind of misogyny to assume that a cast of women could not collaborate with a male director, but that their voices would be muffled? It assumes that as the producer, lead actor, and creator of this project, my female vision is compromised by the presence of a male. This play was performed by all women, but there were male characters. Might not there be something to be gained by having a male voice in the room for a discussion on gender? The “male” in Shakespeare’s work cannot be excised, and in a discussion of gender, I want to hear from multiple points on the spectrum.

Finally, there is a kind of buffer or even perhaps level of credibility that is earned with a male director. It is steeped in misogyny and destructive patriarchal views, but having a male perspective allows us to reach the audience that might not even consider what we had to say if we were an entirely female company. It says to that audience that we are willing to have a conversation, and that everyone is welcome to the table. From there we can address the feminist ideas our production put forth, but we can't have that conversation if those people aren't there at all.

This brings me to the final element I wanted to explore – the audience. How is the body changed by the addition of the audience? Is there a way to separate the male gaze and 13 female bodies performing on stage? We may be exploring a nuanced definition of gender and performance, but an all-female show carries its own set of cultural baggage. It seems we are brought back to the Elizabethan conversation about women on stage. Can a group of women perform without being sexualized or commodified in some way? The body in performance is inherently vulnerable. This performance seems especially vulnerable because it calls upon the audience to see past our gendered masks and look at the person underneath. I don't know that there are clear answers, but it speaks to the bravery of the actors I worked with to make themselves so vulnerable and to share so fully. I argue that the best way for an audience to interact with this kind of piece is to be participatory, not just voyeurs. I sought to create an active audience.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE AUDIENCE

I love doing live theatre because of the connection with the audience. I think there is something magical that happens in a theatrical space that it is a sacred conversation happening in the present between the actors and the audience. It was incredibly important to me to foster a strong audience/actor relationship in *Twelfth Night*. To perform in an all-female ensemble is well and good, but if that ensemble is not connecting with a co-ed audience, it loses part of its meaning. As previously discussed, I wanted this process to be inclusive of genders other than female, and I wanted to find ways to invite them into our conversation. My two major methods were utilizing direct address and updating “original practices.”

Direct Address

I was trained in direct address both at the Atlanta Shakespeare Company and in my graduate acting classes with Jim Helsinger. Simply put, direct address is performing text to the audience, as opposed to ignoring them and maintaining a strict fourth wall. An article published in the *Journal of the Wooden O Symposium* about direct address in Western Illinois University’s production of *Henry IV* maintains that “the power of direct address, as a convention for the production of Shakespeare, can restore a vitality and immediacy to the work which is lacking in modern productions as a result of theatre-going etiquette.” (Kincaid 46) Modern audiences are used to a veil between the actors and themselves. This was not the way with Shakespeare’s theatre, and so “as a playwright [he] intentionally and meaningfully utilized direct address in dramatic, thematic, and structural ways” (Kincaid 46). Jim Helsinger writes in his book *Acting Shakespeare’s Text*, “One of the great things about acting Shakespeare is that you are never alone. The audience is always with you. Since the beginning of Greek drama and throughout the Elizabethan theatre age, all characters embraced the audience as co-creators, co-conspirators,

confidants and partners on stage” (“Direct Address, Public Speeches and Soliloquies” 2). Our modern style of acting that ignores the presence of the audience is a relatively new innovation. It bumps up against thousands of years of theatre-making and is detrimental to our understanding of plays written before the invention of the ‘fourth wall.’ Shakespeare’s plays were written to be interactive, and the loss of audience interactivity has led to a breakdown in comprehension. I have heard from many non-theatre people in my life that they “don’t get Shakespeare,” and usually due to bad experiences with verse in high school, they assume they can’t understand it. That is a difficult barrier to overcome with an audience, but I have found that when I make eye contact with an audience member and deliver lines to them, I can break down that wall. “In moments of direct address, the audience turns from a passive listener into a verbal *actor*” (Kincaid 36). Direct address does ask more from the audience, but I find that engagement to be an energizing force in the space. The audience is invited to “lean in” rather than “sit back and enjoy the show.” I judge it is much harder to tune out when an actor is looking into their eyes and speaking to them specifically and directly. I am a firm believer that direct address is not only the original intent of Shakespeare, but the best way to bring his verse to modern audiences. It is a simple way to get in touch with the way Shakespeare was originally performed, and it assists with comprehension.

Direct address had a second, more subtle purpose because of the all-female cast. We are not used to hearing women speak Shakespeare for a length of time uninterrupted and without distraction. After all, according to statistics compiled by *The Guardian*, “Only 17% of speeches in Shakespeare’s plays are women” (Yeung). In an average Shakespearean production, audience have to listen to women for less than 1/5 of the show. We asked an audience to sit and engage with these 13 women for two hours, to listen, and to look them in the eyes as they spoke. That is

still a radical request for everyday Americans. The Center for American Progress published a report on the “Women’s Leadership Gap” and noted that despite the fact that “women have outnumbered men on college campuses since 1988...as recently as 2012, their ‘share of voice’ - the average proportion of their representation on op-ed pages and corporate boards; as TV pundits, Wikipedia contributors, Hollywood writers, producers, and directors; and as members of Congress- was just 18 percent” (Warner). Despite 400 years of progress, we’ve only managed to gain 1% more representation for the female voice. It is empowering to take back that 83%. In *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook*, Elaine Aston writes about how feminist theatrical practices “move women’s issues, experiences and stories centre stage. Women desired to be ‘seen’ as women and not as a representation of a masculinist imagination” (Aston 6). This production was all about being seen, and direct address required the audience to not just look at us, but to see us and to really listen. It was powerful to behold and empowering to do.

Original Practices

I was originally inspired to put on *Twelfth Night*, because OST was presenting an all-male version of *Twelfth Night* in their 2017/2018 season. I was fortunate enough to be able to rent one of the smaller performance spaces at the Lowndes Shakespeare Center, and for one weekend in March, audiences could see two productions of the same play happening in the same building. “Original practices” is a widely debated term, meaning something slightly different every place it is used. I was introduced to “original practices” at the Atlanta Shakespeare Company, which defines it as “a process that begins with the way the play was originally staged in its own time and ends with a modern audience experiencing the play in a manner consistent with its creator’s original intent... We use Elizabethan style costumes on our Globe-inspired (Shakespeare’s original theatre) stage and talk directly to you, the audience, in much the same

way we believe Shakespeare and his acting company would have directly addressed Elizabethan audience members” (Watkins). OST’s notion of “original practices” included an all-male cast, Elizabethan set and costumes, and Original Pronunciation. Both methods attempt to re-create the experience of Elizabethan audiences by utilizing period appropriate sets, costumes, and music. When discussing the Globe’s take on “original practices,” Klett writes that “there is no way to justify an all-female cast as an ‘original practice,’” because women did not perform on Shakespeare’s stage (*Cross Gender Shakespeare* 140). That being said, “the productions also mitigated the ahistorical presence of women on the Globe stage by paradoxically emphasizing the significance of the original practices” (*Cross Gender Shakespeare* 140). In these productions it seems that the other “original practices” of music, props, and dress made up for the fact that having women on stage is anachronistic. These methods attempt to meld the Elizabethan style of performance with the modern benefits of electricity and female actors. The visual Elizabethan aesthetic is key to this interpretation of “original practices”. My personal interpretation of “original practices” was less concerned with a 16th century look and more about the audience experience. My aim was to bring the spirit of Shakespeare’s original productions to modern audiences. I wanted my audience to feel the emotions I imagine were aroused in Shakespeare’s audiences. I think contemporary clothing and music are more aligned with how Shakespeare’s audiences experienced his plays and remove some of the barriers that 21st century patrons have with classic texts. My goal wasn’t historical accuracy, but accessibility, and I found an all-female cast to be the appropriate 21st counterpart to the practice of single gender casting. I define accessibility as the play meeting the audience where they are. I wanted it to be the kind of play that got audiences excited about Shakespeare: to make my audiences feel smart, not dumb. Contemporary audiences are, by and large, much more educated than those in Shakespeare’s day.

They have all the tools to enjoy and engage with his work, and simply need to be empowered to do so.

I wanted to find ways that “original practices” helped the audience to understand and connect with the play. I did not want to create a museum piece, but I think there is a lot of value in trying to figure out what made Shakespeare’s plays so popular in his day. The text is why his plays stand the test of time, but the Elizabethan viewing experience was about more than his incredible language. It was about community, revelry, and above all, entertainment. I wanted my version of “original practices” to tap into that idea of entertainment. I wanted it to be the opposite of stodgy, “ivory tower” Shakespeare. I started my process with music. *Twelfth Night* has several songs, but I decided early on that the ones in the text would not serve this production. Shakespeare’s audiences were familiar with the music in his plays and I wanted my audience to be familiar with the music we used. I looked for pieces that captured the same tone as the ones in *Twelfth Night* and noticed that folk and folk/rock music from the 1970s matched up well with this play. Chris and I wanted to open the show with a song to show the shipwreck and set up our characters, and James Taylor’s “Fire and Rain” was just the right mix of melancholy, warmth, and familiarity. From there I explored more 70s folk and rock and found other songs that matched up well with our take on *Twelfth Night*, including Lynard Skynard’s “Freebird” in place of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew’s late-night caterwauling and Fleetwood Mac’s “Landslide” for Feste’s solemn love song. We closed the show with a rousing rendition of Crosby, Stills, and Nash’s “Love the One You’re With.” Music is a great way to inspire emotion and connection to a piece, and it felt appropriate with the spirit of original practices to use popular music and appeal to that connection.

The folk music of the 1970s was my entry point into my setting, but it turned out that it was a perfect concept on many levels. First and foremost, the '70s was the heart of second wave feminism. "In the 1970s feminism began to change women's lives. Those women with access to feminist ideas, thinking and publications -mainly white middle-class women- discovered and challenged the male dominance of social, political, cultural and, for our purposes, theatrical systems" (Aston 5). The '70s was a time of female revolution, in the workplace, political space, and performance space. I feel like a production about challenging gender norms is right at home in the time of Gloria Steinem and Marina Abramović- pioneers of second wave feminism in politics and art. I was inspired by these radical women and wanted to channel their work into the show.

Shakespeare's actors wore clothes contemporaneous to the 16th century. As luck would have it, the styles of the 1970s are back in fashion, and so our 70s inspired costume design fit our concept, the model of contemporary clothes, and our miniscule budget. It was easy enough to thrift together a 70s inspired wardrobe, while still making the actors look like regular people. I don't think that spectacle is necessarily the enemy of accessibility, but I do think that in a performance space as small as ours for this show, simplicity was required.

There were a lot of layers on this show: all female, '70s flair, etc., but I didn't want them to overwhelm the play. I wanted audiences walking away saying that they saw *Twelfth Night*, not all-female '70s style *Twelfth Night*. It's an important distinction to me because I believe that all of these production and directorial choices can put the text front and center, but they can also distract if not done properly. At the end of the day, any version of "original practices" is just style and style is worthless without substance. We continue to do Shakespeare because of the

text, not because of any style we've layered on top, and my benchmark for success with this project was to have the audience better understand and interact with the text.

Audience Interaction

The best way for me to find out if our production successfully communicated *Twelfth Night* was to talk to the audience, and so we had talk backs after each of our three performances. The talk backs were formatted into four sections: popcorn single word responses, "What worked," "What bumped you," and questions. Popcorn single word responses ask the audience to shout out words that the show brought up for them. Here are the popcorn responses from the three performances, with notation for words brought up on more than one night: kickass, joyous (2), fun (3), empowering, entrancing, gender-complicated, colorful, hilarious (3), engaging, enlightening, nostalgic, touching, adorable, whimsical, alright, entertaining, surprising, understandable, talented, wordy, love, great, captivating, liberating, fresh, energetic, engaging, charming. That has some very interesting information for me. First of all, I am pleased that the three most repeated phrases were hilarious, fun, and joyful. That tells me that I convinced a number of people that Shakespeare can be fun and funny, which is not something I take for granted. I'm also proud of responses like "understandable," "empowering," and "enlightening." I'm also excited by more critical feedback in "alright" and "wordy." Critique is key to finding out what does and doesn't work.

The positive feedback from the "what worked" portion of the talk back told me that I found some success with accessibility. The audience was entertained! That is 'original practice' success in my mind. Things that worked for patrons included "costuming," "70s music," "modern twists," "playfulness," "audience interaction," "pacing," "clear language," and the highest praise: "made someone more interested in reading Shakespeare." We had two audience

members on closing night who had never seen a play before who expressed their desire to see more theatre after seeing *Twelfth Night*. I could not ask for a better outcome than to inspire people to see more theatre.

It was wonderful to get so many positive responses, but I was even more inspired by the things that “bumped” or bothered people. If I heard their complaints, that meant that people stayed after the show to have a discussion with me and the cast about what didn’t work for them. Accessibility has to go both ways, and I think my art can only benefit from making theatre a true conversation that invites the audience to respond however they see fit. Critical feedback means that these patrons were committed enough to critique something and engage with us in a dialogue. Some critical feedback I received included not liking ad-libbing, the sword fights, and anachronisms. Some patrons wanted more “masculinity” from the male characters, while others felt the show wasn’t “feminine” enough. Others were unsure of what the all-female cast added to the play.

The Feedback

The question of gender was easily the most discussed and most divisive in the talkbacks. The presentation of gender in our production was both praised and criticized. In the questions portion, we were asked: “How was gender addressed in rehearsal?”; “Why a male director?”; “What was gained by an all-female cast?”; and “What does it mean to have an audience that isn’t ready for all-female Shakespeare?” We did our best to give answers to these in the moment, but they have stuck with me as I write. Many of them are versions of questions I have asked myself at some point in this process, and I think they are all good questions to consider.

I want to spend a bit of time discussing a piece of feedback we received in our final talkback that gets to the heart of this gender quandary. A patron commented that he felt all

female casting was a fine enough gimmick, but that he feared that such a trend would be detrimental. He specifically warned against a “female Willy Loman”, and instead advocated for playwrights (such as himself) to write strong female roles rather than have women portray roles written originally for men. This was perhaps the only piece of feedback I received that caused me to have an emotional reaction. It struck me as offensive and shortsighted and not especially useful for the discussion we were having in that space. I don’t remember what my exact response to this person was, but I doubt that it did much to change their mind. The coded language of this being a shtick of hysterical women had turned me into a hysterical woman. As a scholar-actor, I have to try to find a balance between theory/evidence and my personal experience. I struggled in this moment to be the informed academic, because it felt like a personal attack on my art. He was ‘mansplaining’ my art to my face, and that was incredibly frustrating. I felt as though I had failed in some way for someone to so clearly miss the point. His perspective was that men could fix this problem by telling our female stories for us. Feminist theatre is all about allowing women to tell their own stories, and my particular research has been about women finding their stories inside of male texts. I think there are nuanced female stories to be explored within the established male dominated canon, and it must be women to excavate them. Why is there so much resistance to women expressing their voice in the theatre?

In a December 2010 Op-Ed for *American Theatre* magazine, Richard Schechner prophesied the feedback I would receive at my talk-back. “In most other areas of political, professional and aesthetic life, women are claiming their place, but not as much in theatre. No one raises an eyebrow about a female prime minister, but there would still be a to-do about a woman on Broadway playing, say, Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Not playing Willy as ‘a woman,’ but as the male character Miller wrote” (Schechner 26). Indeed, Mr.

Schechner, eight years and a failed female presidential bid later, men are still outraged at the specific notion of a Lady Loman. I can't say for sure why Willy Loman is the go-to for roles that women could not properly play, but it is striking that a character who embodies the failure of the American Dream is distinctly "male." Why not Stanley Kowalski or Yank? The American theatre canon is littered with toxic masculinity, but world-wearied Willy is the epitome of maleness on stage? Is the emasculation that Willy suffers by losing his job and the respect of his family made worse by a female body enacting that shame? Or is Willy the existentialist American cousin of the melancholy Dane? But I digress. While I think Mr. Schechner is a bit idealistic about his assessment of women's progress, he is correct that female to male cross-gender casting is not accepted in the American canon. Inclusive casting has become a more visible topic, particularly color conscious casting, with the success of shows like *Hamilton*. However, "gender is more resistant, sexism being so deeply, almost "naturally," encoded in Western culture" (Schechner 27). The progress of women's rights is historically slower than that of civil rights for marginalized men. The Fifteenth Amendment prohibited the government from denying men the right to vote based on their race in 1870. It wasn't until the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 that women were afforded the same right. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote in her famous "Portia's Progress" speech, "the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791 had little immediate effect on the legal status or rights of women.... It was not until after the Civil War and the resultant adoption of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to our Constitution that there were national guarantees for certain individual liberties which the states could not abridge. But even these additions to our Constitution did not easily translate into concepts that benefited women as a group until the last half of the twentieth century." She goes on to discuss how the courts did not really start to view men and women as wholly equal until

the 1970s. We see the same trend in every branch of our government. Hiram Rhodes Revels was the first black Senator in 1875, while Jeannette Pickering Rankin was the first female Congresswoman in 1916. Thurgood Marshall was the first Supreme Court Judge of color in 1967, Sandra Day O'Connor the first woman on the court in 1981. Barack Obama was our first black president in 2008, and we have yet to have a female Commander in Chief. Our country seems slow to dole out equality, particularly to its female citizens.

I want to address the secondary part of my patron's criticism: that the answer is not cross-gender casting, but the writing of more and better roles for women. Richard Schechner, again, is one step ahead, "Of course one can, and must, call for more new plays with more and better roles for women...But no matter how many worthy new plays are written, the classic Western repertory continues to be played, and this repertory is hugely over-balanced in favor of men's roles. This imbalance will always be with us, because the repertory is just that: works that are produced again and again. It is an imbalance that can be redressed only by re-conceiving what performing on the stage is" (Schechner 26). While I wholeheartedly support the writing of strong female characters (preferably by strong female playwrights), I also acknowledge that no one will ever write another *Hamlet*; or another *Twelfth Night*; or indeed another *Death of a Salesman*. These shows are continually remounted because they are great plays, and they continue to bring in audiences. Why should my gender limit my chance to embody those characters and those texts? Will the classics remain classics when the national conversation dictates that we stop supporting plays that insist on their attachment to the white male monolith? We have culturally accepted putting all kinds of themes and settings on Shakespeare, so why should gender be any different? Is anything besides traditionally cast and traditionally set Shakespeare just a gimmick? And does the exploration have to begin and end with 500 year old texts?

Schechner lists five possible things to be gained from a (specifically American) experiment in gender bending: “First, it would give actors the chance to play roles that have been off limits by virtue not of skills but because of gender, race, age or body type” (30). This is an exciting prospect to the actor in me. The Shakespearean canon is famously lacking in women’s roles, but couldn’t the same be said for many of the American classics? There is something very punk rock, very rugged individualistic, very all-American rebellious in breaking with tradition, and I think that the American Theatre would be better off for it. I can learn so much as an actor from roles that do not resemble my day to day experience, whether that be by virtue of gender, age, class, or physical features. Might I not perhaps discover something new about a character because of my different perspective? “Second, it would drive a wedge between actor and character, encouraging spectators and performers to critically examine interacting performance texts rather than assuming a simple-minded identification of the performer with the role” (Schechner 30). This is a somewhat more divisive outcome, but I think a necessary one. Great art must challenge its audience in some fashion. Cross-gender casting forces a discussion. It forces a level of critical thinking that the average audience member might not be expecting, but can only lead to more thought, more questions, and more understanding. That may be a tension with the value I’ve put on accessibility, but I would argue that entertainment and education are not mutually exclusive. Theatre is perhaps the most accessible way to encounter difficult questions. It is that element of entertainment that makes the education easier to swallow. “Third, it would further stress the already weakened link between theatre and realism” (Schechner 30). Theatre has to embrace its theatricality to compete as a form of entertainment. It has to embrace the conversation happening live in a room in a particular moment, to embrace the call of imagination, to make itself distinct and indeed preferable to the passive consumption of the

film/television/internet media. “Fourth, performers and spectators alike would be more able to see gender, race, age and body type not as ‘biological destinies’ but as flexible, historically conditioned performative circumstances” (Schechner 30). This is the revolutionary effect for which I most wish. Theories about gender performance and gender identity have existed in academia and LGBT+ circles for almost 30 years, but they are reaching a new cultural zeitgeist. When critical theory is able to jump out of journals and into the public discourse, it is able to affect change. At the end of the day, an understanding that gender is performative is a lesson in empathy. It’s the lesson that the things we think make us different or unreachable can be knocked down like cardboard trees.

Theatre can be one of the greatest teachers of empathy in an embattled world, and I think that opening up casting is a key part of that instruction. It allows more bodies, more voices, more experiences to be represented on the American stage, and I can only see the benefits in that. Given the opportunity to give a better answer, I would urge the patron at *Twelfth Night* to give the notion of Female Willy Loman a second thought. It might be the *Death of a Salesman*, but it could also be the birth of a new dawn.

I challenge audiences to consider that new and different does not automatically equate with “gimmick.” Or perhaps I should reclaim the term. I don’t think that cross-gender casting is a “trick” to get the attention of audiences, but I do think it is a challenge to get in conversation with audiences. Engagement is my goal, and perhaps it doesn’t matter what got them in the door, but how I communicate with them in the space.

Is challenging the audience an “original practice”? I think that having a dialogue with them is, but what about asking them to question their assumptions about Shakespeare, or gender, or performance? I don’t know that there is a clear answer to that, except that we are still

performing Shakespeare's works. Something about them has captivated audiences for 400 years, so I think it is reasonable to assume that his audiences were more than just entertained- they were moved. Perhaps the final element of "original practice" is just that: finding a way to entertain, but also to speak to a group of people across political and socio-economic divides in a way that has a lasting impact. That is certainly the kind of art I seek to make.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Perhaps this is the hours of research and writing talking, but the first question on my mind at this point in my thesis journey is “Why did I choose this project?” It’s not that I regret my decision, but I am genuinely curious as to why I wanted to work in this way. It was in no way the path of least resistance to produce my own work – to take on these many roles. Was it because of my need to micromanage? My urge to be in charge? An egocentric desire to be the lead in a Shakespeare play? Did I learn my lesson? What lessons did I learn? I don’t know that there is a good answer. I know that this process has challenged me mentally, emotionally, and interpersonally. It has pushed me to collaborate and compromise at every turn. I wanted to do this work because I love Shakespeare, and I want to make a career out of studying and performing his work. In what capacity, I don’t know. I think I must return to this idea of Academic, Actor, and Agitator, and reflect on how those roles have changed and changed me throughout this process. What did I learn from them and how will those roles shape me as an artist in the future?

The Academic

Though I have always excelled at academics, graduate school has put my best efforts to the test. I am fond of “right answers” and have been challenged by the notion that they may not exist, and even if they do, it is not the endgame to find them. I have asked so many questions throughout this process, and only begun to answer a few of them. I tend to imagine an “academic” as being one who is knowledgeable and has answers, but in my own experience, to be an academic is to be a questioner. In this way, art and academia are linked. As much as I would like to find objective truth about art or gender theory or feminist performance, I must conclude that it is all subjective. I have found what I believe to be better’ practices and have

proposed ideas as to how to better include women in the conversation and performance of Shakespeare. I also understand that these practices that I suggest throughout my thesis should and will continue to be challenged. I struggle with the notion of a conclusion to this thesis because it is not concluding. This is an ongoing process of questioning and researching and experimenting with new ways of thinking. I have so many questions that have arisen as a result of this project and have been inspired to deepen my research into feminist themes in the theatre. It inspired me to do an Independent Study in my final semester of grad school based around female playwrights and re-defining the theatrical canon. It has caused, me to question why American theatres traditionally approach Shakespeare in the way they do, and to find alternative methodologies. It has made me more curious. If high school teaches one what to think, college teaches one how to think, graduate school has taught me why to think; which is that questioning and constantly re-defining my relationship to academia and my art makes me a better academic and a better artist.

The Actor

My role as an actor was the easiest to take on. I am most comfortable in my role as actor because it is what I am trained in. As an actor in this process, I was able to just focus on the tools I've gathered from all my years of training and playing. As I mentioned in Chapter III, my worst actor habit is being too intellectual, and this process forced me to get out of my head as an actor because I had too many other things to pull my attention as a producer/academic/agitator. The performing was the fun part – the part where I could engage with my fellow actors and the audience. Acting became a space of release. I relinquished control of all other elements of the production, and just played. Now I must figure out how to bring that confidence and relaxation into my work as an actor when that is the only role I'm undertaking. As I write, I am in

rehearsals for *Hamlet* and *Gertrude & Claudius* at Orlando Shakes. How do I recapture the simple joy of performance when my brain is no longer cluttered with production elements far outside my scope of control and influence? The weight of this thesis provides a healthy dose of outside anxiety, but do I need external circumstances to be free on stage? This paper is not a treatise on my mental health or my ability to work out my anxieties through performance, but it is worth noting for myself that this project helped me recapture a love of acting that I had been missing in my practice. It encouraged a sense of play that I sometimes lose, and I am grateful for the process because of it. The journey to replicate that joy and playfulness is not yet clear, but I know I can look to this project as a guide.

The Activist

As I reflect on this process, I am struck by the parallels to the larger conversations we are having nationally about representation and inequality. My work cannot be separated from the larger movements in our political landscapes, from #MeToo to Time's Up to the Women's March. Much of my research has been inspired by scholarship from the third wave of feminism, but my work is solidly within the current (fourth) wave. That is not to say they are opposing movements – a major critique of the “wave” terminology is that it implies generational arguments. It is, however, important to acknowledge how the ubiquity of the internet and social media has changed the way we are talking about and participating in feminism. I must pause to acknowledge how the time in which I am living has impacted my work. It has become a joke among my fellow graduate students that our MFA stands for “mother (expletive) activists.” Our goals are larger than personal desires to perform a given role; they are to make lasting change in the way we make, talk about, and engage in theatre. I am proud to be a troublemaker in this way: to continue the role of agitator beyond this process. What began as a somewhat selfish desire to

have more of Shakespeare's text at my disposal has morphed into a passion for using theatre to both represent a more progressive population, and to encourage more progress.

That said, placing myself within the framework of the fourth wave means challenging my own contributions. Intersectionality is a major topic of discussion in 21st century feminism, with good reason. "More than a theoretical framework or praxis of difference, intersectionality addresses the dynamics of inequalities (including identifying those that are less transparent); furthermore, it purposely avoids being a totalizing or 'grand theory' by refusing to conceive disadvantage and subordination 'along a single categorical axis', namely gender" (Zimmerman 57). I am convinced that intersectionality is key to tackling Shakespeare in the 21st century. Intersectional Shakespeare would involve an intentional inclusion of actors from a variety of gender orientations, races, ethnic backgrounds, and ages. It would require a casting mindset that was not "blind," but "conscious." It is a shift from "gender-blind" or "color-blind" to an acknowledgement of the semiotic implications of any given body on the stage and how that body interacts with the story being told. It is, frankly, a lot of work. It is simpler for a company to do Shakespeare as it has always been done.

Change must be made, however, for Shakespeare and live theatre in general to reach new audiences and stay vital in the 21st century. Millennials are a discerning audience base, and [we] have called for art and media to reflect our diversity. We've grown up on the internet and have therefore been exposed to so many more voices and experiences than any other generation before us. The 2018 midterm elections featured a record number of women, people of color, and LGBTQ persons being elected to public office. It is clear that the future is not only female; it is a rainbow and audiences are going to ask their art makers to paint with more colors. The conversation must strive to include marginalized voices. I must acknowledge that my own work

focused largely on the “single categorical axis” of gender, and there are so many more variables to be considered. I am proud of the work I have done, but I am also challenged to ask more questions and push the conversation forward. The role of agitator must be turned inward as well as out toward the world.

There was a UCF student news media piece about this project, and a line from that broadcast has stuck out to me (and become a joke around my house). The announcer started the package with “Mandi Lee is an actor and producer. She’s also a woman, and what she says matters when it comes to making art.” It was certainly an unintentionally condescending turn of phrase, but you can hear the implication that it is surprising that I’m a woman and that my opinion on art is valid. That it is out of the norm to bear the weight of actor, producer, art-maker and WOMAN. For all my discussion of gender performance and these many roles I took on in this process, I have not thought of “woman” as a role I had to take on. There was the idea of Viola as woman or as man, and I touched upon the notion of everyday gender performance, but I can’t say that it occurred to me that one of the many roles I had to manage was that as woman. It goes back to Butler’s theory: I am well-rehearsed in my social woman mask, and I am well-rehearsed in the reaction that said mask receives. I don’t have any other frame of reference for how I conduct myself as a “female artist” or “female academic” because it is the only gender presentation I know. I don’t question whether I can or should do something because I am a woman. Any doubt or concern about my ability is an external source. There is a wealth of things that I have learned about myself as an artist and a student, and I have also learned that I cannot control how other people process me. I must continue to work and experiment and fail and ignore the labels and boxes I am placed in.

The process of this thesis has been one of self-exploration, from the genesis of the idea to the writing I am doing now. Yet I wonder, what makes this work worthwhile to the general public? To you, reading this paper? I hope that it would be a model for future graduate students who seek to create their own work as a means of exploring an academic lens. More than that, I hope that it causes the reader to question their own views on gender in performance, as I have questioned my own. I hope that it is a step towards finding gender parity in classical performance, and that it presents a compelling argument for it being an academically sound practice. I hope that it provokes discussion, arguments, and eventually change. I hope it is just the first step in a long career of melding theory and praxis and articulating a distinctly female voice in the field of Shakespeare performance.

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