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THE GENDER POLITICS OF SPECTACLE IN STAGING SARAH RUHL'S ADAPTATION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO* AND ATHE 2018: THEATRES OF REVOLUTION

David Callaghan, Kathleen M. McGeever, Emily A. Rollie and I presented together on a panel at ATHE 2017, named "[s]pectacle as an Alternative to Bells and Whistles: Four Directors Reflect on Visual Communication and a Return to the Imagination in Staging." My paper, entitled "I am about to understand...": The Gender Politics of Spectacle in Sarah Ruhl's Stage Directions," reflects on a recent production of Sarah Ruhl's *Orlando* that I directed (with substantial assistance from Jeremy Ohringer, M.F.A. Directing, Boston University '19) for the 24th Annual Conference of the International Virginia Woolf Society, Department of Fine and Performing Arts at Loyola University Chicago, and Room(s) Theatre. I argue that the creativity and collaboration required to achieve the visual pictures of Ruhl's verse and stage directions (based heavily on Virginia Woolf's text) reinforce the play's dramaturgy in relation to gender and identity, empowering creativity and fostering community in both ensemble and audience through shared processes of art-making. I place our staging processes in context of larger considerations about gender and space, which I've developed in scholarly writing on staging plays about women and houses. Through ongoing theorizing about directing plays with these subjects, I've developed ideas about gender, space, and style in staging; these ideas help me to understand *Orlando* in unique terms, and relate the fluidity of gender expressions in the novel and play to design and staging choices in production.

Diana Swanson, associate professor in Women's and Gender Studies at Northern Illinois University, provided the following synoptic notes for Virginia Woolf's novel in our program:

"Orlando, the hero/heroine of the novel, begins life as a male in the Elizabethan era and by the end of the novel is a 36-year-old woman in 1928. Sometimes his/her lovers

are women, sometimes men. Throughout his/her centuries of life, shaped by historical and gender changes, s/he writes poetry...." *Orlando*, both the novel and play, can be understood as an integration of gendered identities through art-making. The poet, Orlando, struggles throughout the novel and play to depict in poetry "the natural"—specifically an old oak tree that grows on the grounds of his (then her) estate.

And he tried to describe—
For all young poets are forever describing—
Nature. (142)

Considered by some a companion to Woolf's nonfiction piece *A Room of One's Own*, treatment of space in *Orlando* relates to this architectural symbol. While a house does not figure prominently in Sarah Ruhl's adaptation of Woolf's novel, nonetheless because of the nature of the play and its source material, the relationship of domestic and public spaces in the play can be meaningfully illuminated by theorizing about gender and space. As with time, identity, and gender in the novel and play, treatment of space is fluid and nonconventional. We followed Ruhl's suggestion for flexible casting of the required roles through a collective chorus made up of folks identifying as and playing varied and fluidly expressed genders, races, and sexualities—with simple costume pieces to change characters. The chorus collectively created places and objects, as well as characters, importantly including the oak tree that Orlando tries to write. In notes, Ruhl introduces the performance style required for *Orlando* with a reference to Vietnamese Ceo Theatre: "In the Russian tradition of Stanislavski, the actor says, 'I will tell you a story about me.' In the German tradition of Brecht, the actor says, 'I will tell you a story about them.' In the Vietnamese tradition, the actor says, 'You and I will tell each other a story about all of us'" (Jenkins qtd in Ruhl 137).

At the end of the play, Orlando is finally able to complete her poem, when, safely at home and away from the chaos of the modern world, she defies sexual limitations and dares to write while married. The success of the creative act also requires that she acknowledge the need for other people, a collective—both a multiplicity of selves within her, and other people to receive the creative act as audience. This arc of creativity suggest that, while we may start by needing a room of our own, ultimately real creativity (writing "the natural") means breaking it down—moving into liminal space at the threshold (limen) between interior (inner) and exterior (outer) space. I have traced a trend with female-identifying characters in plays about houses: dramatists connect their final acts in houses to society, the public surrounding the private spaces.

As the lines break down between public and private, male and female, Life and Theatre—ALL is HOUSE. In *Orlando*, Sarah Ruhl follows Woolf's path to this limen. The only way to write (and stage) the natural is to occupy this liminal space, materially and collectively.

Understanding the spaces of the story in these terms allowed me to appreciate *Orlando*'s final success in writing the oak tree and suggested a way to stage this event in space. In the final scene, the fragmented 20th-century world drives Orlando running home to the safety of her own room, but she finds she can no longer easily locate herself there.

For she had a great variety of selves to call upon:
The boy who sat under the oak tree
young man who fell in love with Sasha
the boy who handed the queen of all
of rosewater
the poet, the fine lady, the woman who
called Mar or Shelmardine or Bonthrup.
(230-231)

The chorus, aspects of herself and her collective audience, disperse to leave Orlando alone in her room at the return home. According to the gendered dynamics of space outlined above, the place for the chorus to retreat was (naturally) across the threshold of the proscenium, into the auditorium, within and behind the audience. The audience was not aware of their presence, until they began to whisper softly in response to Orlando's calls. This whisper was a collective inspiration of the chorus, which we fostered in many ways, including use of Viewpoints in staging as alternative to Stanislavski's realistic methods. Visited by the then dead Queen Elizabeth, Orlando finally defies gender restrictions for married women, and begins to write. The actor playing Orlando, Annie Murphy, followed a brilliant impulse to write all over the physical world of the set—along chairs, rugs, manikins, and trunks—until finally, the poem is done!—and it "wants to be read...people had become necessary" (232). At this point, the chorus slowly joined Orlando on stage, surrounding her to reprise their collective creation of the oak tree, but this time also including her in the formation. The member of the chorus playing Shel, her husband and male counterpart, entered last, also from the audience, when the script indicates "he came as he always did, in moments of dead calm..." (232). As he joined the collective group of entangled, breathing bodies, fusing actor and audience space (Fig. 3), Orlando uttered the last words of the play, "I am about to understand..." (232).

The idea for staging the end, which received an audible gasp from audiences, came from a dream I had about talking with a friend and mentor, while walking upstairs in a house

FIG. 3 Final moment of *Orlando* PHOTO Julia Eberhardt c/o Loyola University Chicago and Room(s) Theatre



on our university campus where I have staged plays. It was based on my ongoing theorizing about gender and theatrical space, understanding the border of the house as a physical manifestation of a gender binary, and what I've learned from repeated application of these theories in the material terms of production. Culturally speaking, as strictly binaried terms expand to more fluid conceptions and expressions of genders and sexualities, and as the demarcation of public and private spaces shifts, conceptions of domestic spaces on stage likewise change. This staging of the end of *Orlando* provides a physical embodiment of the breakdown of public and private, imaginary and material—a union of multiple and variously gendered selves....With *Orlando*, in the *theatre*, we are, perhaps, about to understand...

I am excited to serve as Vice President for Conference 2018 and am proud that the editors in this forum join me and other leading scholars from a variety of disciplines across ATHE focus groups on the conference planning committee. The full call for papers, written by the 2018 Conference Committee, follows.

THEATRES OF REVOLUTION: PERFORMANCE, PEDAGOGY, AND PROTEST

The 2018 ATHE Conference focuses on revolution, resistance, and protest, and the multiple ways these ideas—and the actions that spring from them—impact theatre in higher education. Drawing on the city of Boston for its historical significance in the American Revolution, and as a site of both academic excellence and artistic innovation, we aim to explore revolutions at the multiple intersections of politics, theatre education, and professional practice. We will consider various meanings of revolution, in scholarship and performance as well as in our work as educators with students in the classroom, rehearsal hall, and in the larger context of college campuses.

The conference theme invites examination of ways in which electoral representation resonates with theory and practice in theatre-making: How does representation in politics relate to equitable and fair casting and employment practices? How do changing practices require revolutions in production methods and pedagogies? How might theatre scholarship serve a meaningful public function, engaging with performances—both artistic and civic—that surround us? How might we create art that activates audiences to make lasting social change?

Boston's history allows us to consider performance and revolution in uniquely complicated ways. Events of the American Revolution are memorialized throughout the city in museums and public monuments, many involving performed reenactments. The site of the Boston Tea Party, a protest by white men who masqueraded as Native Americans to resist "taxation without representation" by the British, is marked by a museum only a short distance from the conference hotel. However, other revolutions remain unmarked, such as the systematic and violent dispossession of the Wampanoag, Nipmuc, Massachusetts and other nations of the Dawnland by European colonists. In contemporary US politics, the Tea Party has itself become a kind of costume for protest. Groups claiming its ethos arguably play with tropes of revolution alongside those of racial superiority, misogyny, and nativism. Consideration of how contemporary and historical enactments of the foundational stories of the United States of America perform race and gender, as well as erasure of the land's history before colonization, raises complex questions concerning representation and revolution in this context. These questions resonate in turn with debates prompted by popular theatrical productions like *Hamilton*, which not only evidences revolutions in storytelling and casting practices, but famously inspired a Twitter war between artists and politicians about the role of theatre as "safe space" or platform for protest.

We see questions about safe space and protest rising on college campuses: demonstrations and counter-demonstrations by right and left, changing policies regarding academic freedom, the development of professor watch lists, conceal and carry laws, designation of sanctuary campuses, and the ongoing impact to students who are especially vulnerable under new policies, including undocumented and transgender students. These concerns intersect with urgent questions over funding for the arts and for higher education, the cost of education, and perpetuation of economic and institutional inequities on racial, ethnic, and gender lines.

Join us in Boston in 2018 to explore the potency and precarity of theatre in higher education to protest oppressions and advance revolutionary change.

We hope directors and choreographers in SDC, especially those who work in higher education, will consider joining theatre educators in Boston in 2018, as well as leaders in other professional organizations such as TCG and USITT for workshops, plenary events, special sessions, and performances centered around this important and exciting theme.

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