

Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word: Intersectional Feminist Directing in Theory and in Practice

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Abstract

As a theatre and gender studies double major at the University of Victoria, I have been able to critically think about the ways each of my fields of study could benefit the other. In my experience, many courses in the UVic Department of Theatre generally focus on dramatic texts and theoretical literature written by white men. Consequently, contributions to the theatre by women, people of colour, and/or non-Western theatre practitioners are largely dismissed or ignored. My frustration with this pattern was what led me to create *Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word*, a part scripted, part devised performance piece that staged scenes from classic and contemporary plays using directing theory written by feminists, for feminists. I curated the excerpts, wrote the transition-text, and directed the play using an intersectional feminist framework. The project was an experiment in applying intersectional feminism to theatre directing in order to critique the way the male-dominated canon of plays and theories shapes theatre education. Through this project, I found that intersectional feminist directing techniques foster collaboration; encourage discussion and mutual education about identity, oppression, and representation; and can be applied to the production of both classics and contemporary feminist plays and to the creation of new work by an ensemble.

Keywords: theatre; applied theatre; feminism; intersectionality; gender studies

Territorial Acknowledgement

Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word, a part scripted, part devised performance piece that is the subject of this paper, opened with the following monologue shared by two cast members:

CAST MEMBER 1: Good afternoon. I am a Métis woman from Manitoba. I grew up on the land of the Métis, Anishihabiwaki peoples, and the Cree and Oji-Cree speaking peoples. I grew up prideful in an aboriginal community that allowed me to grow and strive.

CAST MEMBER 2: And I am an immigrant that currently resides on the lands of the WSÁNEĆ, Lekwungen, and Songhees nations, and have grown up on the lands of the Sencoten, Malchosen, Semiahmoo, and T'Sou-ke speaking peoples as well. I am grateful

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that I was able to live in safety from my own homeland, currently unsafe and war-torn. I understand that it's a privilege for me to live here and I hope to return the favour in consistently advocating for the safety of those who were here first.

We also speak on behalf of our entire team, who would like to express gratitude to the Okanagan peoples, the Niitsitupi, the Tsuu T'ina, the Sto lo, the Snuneymuxw, and the Ts'uubaa-asatx peoples for the beautiful lands we had the privilege of growing up on.

CAST MEMBER 1: I have felt utter heartbreak and would like to acknowledge the pain that not only my grandfather endured, but the shared pain of all my peoples. As feminists we recognize that the feminist movement has not always been a movement that has offered safety and love to the Indigenous peoples; rather, it has historically been a tool used to inflict harm on them. We are so grateful and privileged to be studying and to have created this show on the Lekwungen-speaking peoples' traditional territories, and would love to pay respects to the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ people whose historical relationships still stand with this land today.

Introduction

When I tell people that I am doing a double major in theatre and gender studies, I get a lot of comments on the unique nature of my chosen field of study. *Theatre and gender studies. What an odd combination*, they remark. *Yes*, I used to say. *It is a bit odd, but I couldn't choose between the two*. Theatre and gender studies were never related in my mind. They were simply two different disciplines that I enjoyed for different reasons.

It wasn't until the latter half of my degree that I started to realize how interconnected my two majors actually are. They are not only interconnected, but also interdependent. First, I began to see the power of using theatre as a medium for social change, for knowledge mobilization, and for starting conversations about oppression, power, and resistance. More recently, I have become interested in how this interdisciplinary relationship works in reverse. Theatre can surely be a medium through which the ideals of gender studies can be presented, but can gender studies be a medium through which theatre can be presented, analyzed, and recreated? As an aspiring theatre director with strong feminist values, the thought of exploring this question piqued both my academic curiosity and my desire to create.

The majority of my theatre education has certainly not incorporated the concepts that have become so important to my work in gender studies. Having attended the UVic Department of Theatre for four years, I have noticed that the courses offered in directing have most often focused on theories and methods derived from the male-dominated canon; students like myself, who choose to study directing, therefore become well versed in plays and methodologies of a particular type—namely, those for which the intended audience was white and male. Despite the fact that these texts are generally presented as universally relevant to all theatre practitioners, I have often struggled to accept them as the texts that define theatre. This has led to feelings of isolation within directing and other theatre classes. I always had questions about the plays we read and the theories we study, but, as it turned out, never the ones the professors wanted to hear.

When I grew tired of feeling like applying traditional directing methods to my practice was like forcing a square into a circular opening, I went on a search for alternatives, and what I found was a body of literature written by feminist theatre practitioners and scholars critiquing the male traditions of making theatre and proposing alternative ways for feminist directors to hone their craft. These texts prompted within me a curiosity and fascination with the potential of feminist directing theories. What might happen if a feminist director used these texts as the foundation of

her practice, rather than the theories found in the canon? This was the question I sought to answer when I undertook the interdisciplinary research project that became *Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word*.

Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word is a part scripted, part devised performance piece that stages scenes from classic and contemporary plays using directing theory written by feminists, for feminists. I curated the excerpts, wrote the transition-text, and directed the play, which was performed on February 27 and 28 and March 1, 2019 at the UVic Phoenix Theatre by an ensemble of five actors who were selected through an audition process. As a second part of the research process, a 60-minute focus group was held with the actors in order to gain insight into how they viewed the process in relation to their previous experiences. The project was an experiment in using feminist theories of directing to critique the way the male-dominated canon of plays and theories shapes theatre education in the UVic Phoenix Theatre and beyond¹. Because the topic had personal relevance to everyone involved, it also served as an opportunity for us, as theatre students, to reflect on our experiences on how power, oppression, and politics of representation had affected each of us uniquely at the intersections of our identities. The purpose of this essay is to offer a personal reflection on the process of creating *Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word* and the strategies and methods used in the direction of the show. First, I provide an overview of the canon of theatre theory and illustrate how it continues to influence authors of contemporary directing texts and handbooks. I then discuss the creation of the scripted portion of the show and the process of bringing it from page to stage. Finally, I reflect on the strengths and challenges of the specific feminist theories and strategies I used. I offer this project as an introductory exploration of how feminist theories of theatre work in practice. I argue that intersectional feminist directing techniques foster collaboration; encourage discussion and mutual education about identity, oppression, and representation; and can be applied to the production of both classics and contemporary feminist plays and to the creation of new work by an ensemble.

Literature Review

The dominant discourse surrounding Western theatre directing has been largely dominated by male philosophers and theatre practitioners. The first section of theatre historian Daniel Gerould's (2000) edited collection of theatre theory, *Theatre/Theory/Theatre: The Major Critical Texts from Aristotle and Zeami to Soyinka and Havel*, is Aristotle's *The Poetics* (4th c. B.C.E.). *The Poetics* is generally regarded by modern directors as the earliest literature on play analysis, and is therefore thought to be an essential text for directors. Contemporary authors (see D. Ball, 1984; W. Ball, 1983; Innes & Shevtsova, 2013; Kiely, 2016; Mamet, 2010; Mitchell, 2009) often ground their theories and methods, either directly or indirectly, in Aristotelian ideals. Aristotle defined theatre as

the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions." (4th c. B.C.E., p. 49) Although Aristotle was speaking specifically about tragedy, as contemporary theatre theorist Damon Kiely (2016) states, "over time, his description has been applied to plays in general" (p. 5). However, using Aristotle's definition outside of its historical context raises a number of questions that are of interest to intersectional feminist

¹While this project focused specifically on the experiences of myself and the participants in at UVic, "beyond" refers to a number of community, university, and professional theatres that the actors had worked in prior to this project, which they indicated were similar in practice to the Phoenix Theatre at UVic.

theatre practitioners: What counts as “serious?” For whom is the language meant to be pleasurable? Whose pity and fear is meant to be aroused?

Additionally, the methods put forth by famed actor/director Konstantin Stanislavski in his books, especially *An Actor Prepares*(1936), *My Life in Art*(1948), and *Building a Character*(1950), continue to dominate Western actor-training in the theatre, making these texts popular resources for contemporary directors. Georg II, Duke of Saxe Meiningen, one of the first modern directors of theatre (see Canning, 2005, p. 49), and Bertolt Brecht (1964) are seen as other important early 20th century figures in the field of directing. This is the body of work that continues to be treated as the foundation of acting and directing theory on which recent authors have built their own methodologies. As theatre historian Charlotte Canning (2005) has pointed out, this historical narrative of the white male as director ignores the contributions of others to theatre scholarship. This exclusion of the voices of those who are non-white and/or non-male from the discourse of directing is still prevalent in contemporary theatre literature.

Contemporary popular handbooks for theatre directors generally derive their methods from the dominant historical discourse, and especially from Aristotle and Stanislavski. Authors such as American directors David Ball (1984), William Ball (1983), Damon Kiely (2016), and Katie Mitchell (2009), for example, have developed relatively similar theories and methodologies for directing, all of which rely on the traditions of text analysis established by Aristotle and Stanislavski. Given this foundation, it is not surprising to find ample evidence that the writers of contemporary directing theory are writing for the directors of the theatre they have come to know through their own experience with literature and practice: white men. For example, William Ball uses exclusively male pronouns to describe directors and actors. Additionally, he feminizes actors by representing them as weak, unintelligent, and inferior to the director. He claims,

Each actor who enters the profession carries with him from childhood a starvation for approbation. As he grows older, he finds that acting is a socially acceptable form of doing something in hope of getting the kind of approval that he missed in his childhood.” (p. 46)

Katie Mitchell’s “Twelve Golden Rules for Working with Actors” (pp. 119–121) also exhibits an inherent preference for masculine values (e.g., strength, control, separation of personal and work life) and discourages feminine values (e.g., emotion, care, integration of personal and work life)². Mitchell suggests that a director “keep clear the boundaries between actors’ private lives and the work” (p. 123), meaning that sharing too much about personal experiences should be discouraged unless the director deems that it is useful to the development of the character or scene. While Mitchell’s intent is partially motivated by the need to keep the rehearsal room from becoming a therapy session (p. 123), there is a difference between keeping actors safe and comfortable and dismissing the learning and personal and professional growth that can come from the sharing of personal experience.

A number of strategies for developing a feminist directing practice that rejects the canon of theatre theory have been put forth by theatre scholars such as Donkin and Clement (1993), Shanahan (2011), and Young (2012). All of these authors agree that in order to use these strategies, however, a feminist director must first be able to recognize and subvert the normalized strategies used by the playwrights of the classics to uphold male-dominated social norms. In the introduction to their book, *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as if Gender and Race Matter*, Donkin and Clement (1993) discuss the notion of “Big Daddy,” a character from famous American playwright

²It is worth clarifying that by “masculine” and “feminine” values, I do not mean that such values are only or always held by all men or women. I mean only that they have been normalized as being socially appropriate values for men or women

Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) whom they use as a symbol for the systemic and internalized sexism that affects the way female artists create. Big Daddy is the patriarch of a wealthy family, and is dying of cancer—a fact that the people in his family hide from him. He represents a phenomenon in which one would rather lie than face the consequences of living their truth. Young (2012) cites Donkin and Clement's idea of Big Daddy in her discussion of teaching and directing as a feminist, noting the overarching presence of Big Daddy in the student actor's mind. Shanahan (2011) has also reflected on her experience directing in a post-secondary context. Specifically, she discusses her productions of *Hedda Gabler* (1891) by Henrik Ibsen and *Medea* (431 BC) by Euripides, suggesting that feminist theory on negotiating space can be used to find new ways of interpreting the canon at the site of the stage directions.

The theoretical connections made between theatre and feminism build a strong foundation on which feminist directors can play, experiment, and develop their practice. Influential feminist scholar Jill Dolan (1988) breaks these feminist approaches into three categories of feminist thought: liberal feminism, cultural feminism, and material feminism (p. 3). Liberal feminist approaches to theatre focus on the similarities between men and women, making the argument for women to be involved in the theatre industry because they are the same as men, and therefore capable of doing the same jobs as men. This assumes that the solution to sexism in the theatre industry is solely the responsibility of women. They must prove themselves as worthy as men because they are equally as capable as men (see, for example, Suzman, 2012). Cultural feminism, on the other hand, relies on the differences between men and women to make the argument for women to create a counter-culture. Many feminist and/or women's theatre companies created in the 1970s formed their objectives based on cultural feminism (Sullivan 1993, p. 15). As Dolan points out, however, cultural feminism is inherently problematic because of its reliance on "absolute gender categories" (p. 5) which "elide the difference between sex and gender" (p. 6). A cultural feminist approach assumes that all women are the same because of their shared social and biological experience of being women. By necessity, it excludes anyone not seen as a "real" woman. It ignores the diverse struggles of women marginalized by race, ability, class, and/or sexuality. It completely excludes trans and non-binary people.

The final form of feminism identified by Dolan is material feminism. She defines it as follows: "Material feminism deconstructs the mythic subject Woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations. . . . [It] considers [gender polarization] a social construct oppressive to both women and men" (p. 10). Looking at feminism from a materialist standpoint means recognizing the ways in which a dominant class of people—in this case, men—gain a monopoly on cultural production; "the ideas of the ruling class come to be considered normative for the culture at large" (p. 15). Material feminism, then, is useful for its ability to highlight the ways in which power is related to representation and cultural production. Where it lacks as a theoretical framework is in its failure to conceptualize the nuances of power dynamics. For example, a straight white woman may be a part of an oppressed class of people because of her gender, but she is also capable of oppressing others by nature of the power she holds in other relationships. If she uses a material feminist approach to create an alternative method of making theatre, for example, she may unintentionally perpetuate the same oppressive practices by presenting her experience on stage as *the* experience of women, excluding and erasing women of colour, lesbians, trans women, Indigenous women, women with disabilities, and anyone else who does not match her own identity.

Each type of feminism that Dolan lists has its own shortcomings, leaving them all ultimately inadequate frameworks for a theory of theatre. I offer intersectional feminism as a hopeful alternative. Intersectional feminism has yet to be explored in-depth as a theoretical framework for studying theatre and performance. Intersectionality, a term coined by Black feminist Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), is a mode of thought used to describe the interlocking systems of oppression present in a person's life. Because the majority of feminist scholars have adhered to one of the feminisms

listed above, with an increasing preference in the field for material feminism, directly applying an intersectional framework to the process of creating/directing a play poses a host of new challenges. These challenges, which I will discuss later in detail, have no easy solutions, and I am certainly unable to provide adequate ways to address them. I can say, however, that the way intersectionality altered my approach to directing resulted in an extremely rewarding experience. It is my hope that outlining my attempts at intersectional feminist directing will spark further exploration of the topic in theory and in practice.

Project Objectives

Before beginning the process of creating the show or developing my theoretical framework and exact methodology, it was important to establish clear goals for what I hoped to accomplish by producing a play about feminism and theatre as a method of researching how feminism and theatre interact when combined in practice. The three objectives of the project were as follows:

1. Put the spotlight on feminist directing theories which are not taught at the Phoenix Theatre at UVic.
2. Comment on the oppressive nature of the directing handbooks and theories that are currently taught at the Phoenix.
3. Expose a team of student actors, designers, and stage management to feminist theatre practices and literature.

Because the primary audience of the show would be UVic theatre faculty, staff, and students, I felt it was important to keep the project specific to the current practices of the Phoenix Theatre. Furthermore, my experiences studying at the Phoenix are what both fuelled the project and facilitated a way for the project to be completed. The Department of Theatre was more than willing to provide technical resources and a studio space for the project to be performed in, which showed that the faculty and staff are open to the idea of a critical lens being placed on their practices. However, I did not wish for the show to be simply a method of scapegoating and finger-pointing. When asked by American author George Brosi (2012) about the key to making the connections necessary for a group of people to make change, Black feminist bell hooks replied, “Love is. When I talk about love, I say that love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust” (as cited in Brosi, p. 109). Throughout my research process, I considered the Phoenix Theatre—staff, faculty, and students—as a community of artists who were interdependent. Members of this community depend on one another for support, ideas, and creative energy. As well, I hoped to approach the work with the creative team and actors with a process-oriented mindset. If those who worked on the project came out of the experience with knowledge of feminist theatre practices and how they can be implemented, the project, in my mind, would be a success.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Despite the popularity of liberal, cultural, and material feminism as theoretical frameworks in the field of feminist theatre studies, I have chosen an intersectional feminist framework for this research project. This means taking into account the ways in which actors and characters are shaped by multiple, intersecting identities at sites of both oppression and privilege.

Using this theoretical framework, I undertook an approach to this project that aimed to make the process of producing a play more collaborative. In traditional theories of directing, directors are at the top of a creative hierarchy and therefore have the authority to make all decisions related

to the show. They have the monopoly on giving feedback. William Ball (1983) claims that he “never permit[s] an actor to tell another actor how to do something. Never” (p. 66). He prefers to have actors bring an idea to him so he can pass it on: “I always pass it on, but I pass it on. . . as my own idea” (p. 66). While the intent behind this process is to prevent actors from feeling undermined by one another, it ultimately promotes the idea that the only one allowed to have ideas is the director. My approach sought to challenge these common practices and expose the actors to a way of working that takes into account the skills, ideas, and experiences of everyone in the rehearsal room. Additionally, this approach is conducive to the intersectional feminist framework under which the project was designed. To view issues such as sexism, racism, misogyny, ableism, and colonialism in theatre schools and companies intersectionally is to acknowledge that, as a researcher and director, there is only so much that I can understand on a personal level. Unlike some of the participants of the project, I do not have lived experience of racism, colonialism, xenophobia, or homo- and trans-antagonism in the theatre or otherwise. Valuing lived experience at the intersections of these identities means being grateful for ideas and creativity that stem from co-creators/co-researchers offering to share their experience and knowledge as a contribution to the project.

The focus group I ran two weeks after the final performance served as a way to evaluate the objectives of the project. Specifically, the merit of the third objective (expose a team of student actors, designers, and stage management to feminist theatre practices and literature) was explored in depth. The 60-minute focus group with the actors was very telling of the successes and challenges associated with the final product. The use of a focus group was necessary to evaluate the project in a way that adhered to the core values of intersectionality. If the actors are valued as co-creators with unique sets of skills and knowledge, it makes sense that they should be involved in every step of the research process, not just in the creation of the show. Focus groups have the ability to facilitate productive discussion not just between director and actors but also among the actors. Feminist scholar Jennie Munday (2014) has pointed out that focus groups are particularly advantageous when the participants form a pre-existing group (in this case, a group of actors that had spent weeks working on a show together prior to their involvement in the focus group) because “discussion can be prompted by reference to shared stories and experiences” (p. 240). The focus group illuminated not only what the actors had to say about the process and the final product, but also the relationships they had built with each other.

In terms of creating the show, I chose to combine devised and scripted scenes in order to best achieve the project objectives. Devised theatre refers to theatre that has no official script provided by a playwright. Rather, it is developed collaboratively by a group of people through a democratic process (Perry, 2011). Devising with an ensemble involves every team member having equally weighted opinions. The end product of the devising process represents theatre that was collectively created from nothing. As theatre practitioner Joan Lipkin (2016) points out, devising is “inherently democratic; it removes us from fixed or static texts, which are most often credited to a single author, into new realms of possibilities for participation and representation” (p. 255). For this reason, it was important to me to include an element of devising in the process of creating the show.

Devising methods were used to create two major parts of the performance: the territorial acknowledgement and the concluding scene of the performance. The idea of writing a personalized territorial acknowledgement stemmed from a group discussion about how oppressed groups including lesbian and gay women, trans women, women of colour, and Indigenous women have historically been excluded from, and often further oppressed by, feminist movements. One participant, who identifies as Métis, spearheaded this discussion, noting how important it was to her to hear territorial acknowledgments at the beginning of performances and events. While I had initially intended to have the standard University of Victoria territorial acknowledgement read out before the performance, devising methods allowed us the flexibility to create our own—one that explicitly incorporated

our own intersections of racial, Indigenous, and/or settler identity as individuals and as feminists. The concluding scene of the play was also devised with the goal of allowing ensemble members to reflect on their own experiences at the site of their intersecting identities. The scene is not permanently documented in writing, but it can be summarized as a poem that weaved together personal stories of oppression and resistance from the ensemble. As we were creating the scene collectively, we consistently spoke of the fear we shared of aligning ourselves with feminist values in the context of many of our theatre courses—particularly courses in acting and directing, in which the male-dominated canon of plays and theory are used as the foundation of the classes. Our fear of saying “the f word” in these contexts seemed to stem from the fear of being seen as confrontational, problematic, or difficult to work with—all of which could be detrimental to our future careers as theatre artists. As such, we decided to end with each member of the ensemble proclaiming, “I am a feminist,” as a way to fight against that fear and to normalize the presence of feminist values in the making of theatre.

Devising tends to work best when either the topic of the show is relatively general (e.g., women in theatre) or the ensemble is made up of people with specialized knowledge in the topic and/or the time and resources to do extensive research on the topic. Because the desired effect of this project required a good deal of research, and because of the time restraints placed on the production, it seemed that an entirely devised show would cause unnecessary stress for the actors and creative team. Therefore, I decided to create a script based on my preliminary research, with the intention of it being a living document once the rehearsal process began. Lipkin (2016) suggests that directors or facilitators “choose a starting point for something important to [them]” (p. 258) before they approach devising with an ensemble. For this project, the starting point took the form of a script that organized my research in a specific way for the ensemble to engage with. The following section outlines the script that I created and the ways in which it was workshopped by the ensemble.

Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word: The Script

My primary inspiration for the scripted portion of the show was the work of Donkin and Clement. As previously mentioned, the editors coined their idea of Big Daddy as a symbol of sexism and misogyny in the theatre industry. This idea, I thought, was ripe with theatrical potential. The book it came from was also ripe with theories, case studies, and knowledge that theatre students, faculty, and staff could learn from. I decided to centre the script on the concept of Big Daddy. From this idea stemmed the first part of the title (*Big Daddy Lives*), which I chose because it states that, even though Donkin and Clement published their book in 1993, the issues that Big Daddy represents are still alive and well in the theatre industry. The second part of the title came later, as I reflected on the experiences I have had at Phoenix that fuelled my desire to work on this project. In my experience at the Phoenix, declaring myself a feminist in the classroom has often labelled me as *difficult to work with* or an *entitled youth*. I have spent a great deal of time throughout the past few years trying not to “out” myself as a feminist to the wrong people. This project was my way of screaming the “f word” at the top of my lungs. It seemed fitting to add a second part to the title of the show in honour of that.

The script started off with the following monologue, delivered by voiceover in the black³:

Excerpt. *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theatre as if Gender and Race Matter*. Edited by Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1993. “In an effort to understand how women are persuaded to abandon their truths, we, the editors, identified repeated incidences all through our work in directing, teaching, acting,

³“In the black” refers to a state where all of the lights are out on the stage

and playwriting that pointed toward a powerful desire to please, to be pleasing. Please whom? we wondered. [...] We instinctively felt that the need to please was connected to a presence that was complex and contradictory: at once protective, generous, jovial, and profoundly disabling. This was not Big Brother. This was Big Daddy.” (*Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word* script, 2019, p. 1)

I chose an accepted academic format for this excerpt to emphasize the importance of academia, particularly feminist scholarship, in developing theories of theatre.

The script consisted of scenes from four different plays, interspersed with quotations from both feminist and traditional theorists, as well as small sections of my own writing. In staging what I call a *theatrical bibliography*, I hoped to address a barrier for incorporating feminist theory into mainstream directing practice. To articulate this issue, I turned to the infamous playwright and director David Mamet (2010). In his own theatre handbook, he states, “Impracticable theory is an impediment to both art and sustenance, and benefits no one save the intellectual to whom theatrical thought is an abstract and enjoyable exercise” (p. 10). There seems to be the perception that theory that goes beyond the nuts-and-bolts aspects of acting, directing, designing, stage managing, and playwriting, is too complex and impractical. I can only imagine that feminist scholarship would be unappealing to Mamet and other professional practitioners. Traditional directing handbooks are undoubtedly easier for most people (myself included) to read and understand than feminist performance theory books and articles. In order to mitigate this issue, I chose to stage excerpts from feminist authors in a way that was theatrical and engaging for an audience. Among a number of excerpts from Donkin and Clement, I included a section from feminist director Christine Young’s (2012) article “Feminist Pedagogy at Play in the University Rehearsal Room,” where she tells an anecdote about attending a class taught by a successful female director who took the liberty of offering an “essential piece of career advice: ‘If you want to succeed as a woman director, you’ve got to carry a machete!’” (p. 137).

To contrast these excerpts, the script also included excerpts from traditional directing handbooks that are widely used by faculty members in the UVic Department of Theatre, such as *Backwards and Forwards* by David Ball (1983) and *A Sense of Direction* by William Ball (1984). This was a strategy used to address the second objective of the project (comment on the sexism present in the directing handbooks and theories that are currently taught at the Phoenix). For example, William Ball comments,

Many actors have spent years learning what is becoming of them. It is helpful for directors and designers to discover these characteristics before the costume is designed. The actors, especially the women, always appreciate questions like, “Is there some color that looks particularly good on you?” Katharine Hepburn has always requested high, tight collars. Some will benefit from discreet padding. There are certain colors that women with red hair cannot wear; it is practical to listen to their preferences. I love women in the theatre to look beautiful. (W. Ball, p. 126)

And David Ball (1984) discusses the concept of forwards in a script as follows:

A forward is any of a myriad of devices, techniques, tricks, manoeuvres, manipulations, appetizers, tantalizers, teasers, that make an audience eager for what’s coming up. If you miss a script’s forwards you miss the playwright’s most distinctive, gripping tool. What stripper does not know that the promise of nudity more excites an audience than does nudity itself? (pp. 46–47)

I included each of these in the script as voiceovers to emphasize the way that books like these loom over theatre education in an eerie, depersonalized way. Theatre students, at least in the Phoenix, are not generally encouraged to think critically about popular directing theories or the authors who write them. The voices of prominent authors such as William and David Ball are meant to be accepted as authoritative without question. They fill the space of the theatre, leaving little to no room for voices that seek to critique them or offer alternatives.

I now focus my discussion on the scenes that I chose to explore in the script. Although there were a number of feminist directing strategies used throughout the selection and rehearsal of all four scenes, there was one overarching strategy attached to each scene that served as my reason to include it. The four scenes, in the order in which they appear in the show, are as follows: 1) a monologue delivered by Big Daddy from Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; 2) an excerpt from a scene entitled "On Men, Sex, and Women, Part 1" from *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel; 3) a section of Act Two of *Oleanna* by David Mamet; and 4) the opening scene from *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Voiceovers as Shaping Interpretation

In the monologue I chose to include in the script, Big Daddy talks about how tired of his wife he is and describes a fantasy about paying to have sex with a "choice one" (Williams, 1955, p. 418). This monologue gave context to the play's title, and, while vulgar, served to encourage the audience to view the character from a classic play in a new light. The monologue was sandwiched between the opening voiceover quotation by Donkin and Clement (see previous section) and the following additional quotation from Donkin and Clement (1993):

Big Daddy was the image we had been looking for. Like Big Daddy of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, he carries with him a combination of paternal protection with ambient sexuality. Directing, acting, or designing for Big Daddy means showing him what he wants to see instead of exposing the awkward contradictions and ambiguities of being female in a sexist, racist society. (pp. 3-4)

The objective of presenting the monologue in combination with the quotations was to shape the audience's interpretation of Big Daddy as a character by offering an alternative way of thinking about what he represents. Canadian theatre director Lezlie Wade (2018) points out that "We are constantly doing plays about characters that are reprehensible" (as cited in "'It's terrifying'," *Accusations*, para. 11), and when those representations go unquestioned, it can foster a culture in which the sexism and violence in monologues like Big Daddy's are normalized and even made light of. The particular monologue, with its ridiculous suggestions—"They say you got just so many [sexual encounters] and each one is numbered" (Williams, p. 418)—and hypersexualization—"I'll strip her naked and choke her with diamonds and smother her with minks and hump her from hell to breakfast!" (p. 418)—might be interpreted as comical. When it is accompanied by a voice pointing out its inherent misogyny, however, it becomes decidedly less humorous.

How I Learned to Drive: Parody & Satire

Next in the play was a scene from *How I Learned to Drive*, by Paula Vogel, which sought to answer a question that one of the actors posed to the audience before the scene began: "How did we learn to put up with Big Daddy?" The scene shows a young woman, her mother, and her grandmother at the kitchen table, talking about men. The dialogue perpetuates the idea that men are the ones who "take" sex and women are the ones who "give" it. I chose to include this scene

because I wanted to include at least one excerpt from a feminist play. Vogel's play follows L'il Bit, a young girl who is being sexually abused by her Uncle Peck, on a coming-of-age journey that shows the painful difficulty of breaking the cycle of abuse. Vogel writes a clever satire of sexist ideas while also making women's role in teaching and perpetuating patriarchal ideals visible. During the focus group, Annie and Tabatha, who played L'il Bit and the Female Greek Chorus, respectively, recalled rehearsing the scene as follows:

ANNIE: And, I remember, like, you said that, you know, women can be some of the greatest teachers of sexism. And, so, collectively, we had that objective—

TABATHA: We had to *act* that.

ANNIE: —as actors. And then, using our characters, and what they would say and maybe how their behaviours are, use their objectives for our own agenda.

The agenda Annie speaks of is one that is in line with the project objectives. Rather than focusing on the realist ideas of character objectives, we interpreted the scene through the lens of parody and satire. Dawning brightly coloured cardboard cut-out costumes designed by third year theatre student Corina Fischer, Annie, Tabatha, and Alysha, who played the Teenage Greek Chorus, used the over-the-top characters of Vogel's play to invite the audience to laugh at the ridiculous ideas about sex and gender that have been naturalized by the patriarchal Western society.

Oleanna: Staging Social and Political Contexts

Of the four plays, I was perhaps most excited to work on *Oleanna*, by David Mamet. My fellow fourth-year students in the department and I were all assigned *Oleanna* to read in our first year, making it a relevant play for me to revisit as a part of this project. Besides its relevance to a large portion of the audience, *Oleanna* was written by a wildly successful man who is infamous for spouting misogynist rhetoric. In his self-aggrandizing book *Theatre*, Mamet (2012) claims that political correctness is a tool of oppressive societies (p. 63) and mocks theatre that attempts to promote social change (p. 25). He also claims that feminists have failed because they did not know how to form "realizable and laudable" (p. 52) goals, and offers the following disturbing story about how his wife went with Harold Clurman, a famous theatre director, to a play one night as a way to illustrate how theatre should be made:

Halfway through the first act [my wife] felt [Harold Clurman's] hand on her knee and gliding up her skirt. "Harold, *please*," she said. "What are you *doing*?" And he replied, "I come to the theatre to enjoy myself." Well, so do I, and so do we all: and that's the only reason we come or should come. (pp. 4-5)

It is clear that there is plenty of material to work with in building a feminist critique of Mamet's work. The evidence used in this project was an interview with Mamet in which he discusses *Oleanna* specifically. The primary strategy used in the presentation of the scene was inspired by one of the approaches laid out in feminist theatre director Gay Gibson Cima's (1993) article "Strategies for Subverting the Canon." Cima suggests that a director might produce a double bill of two strategically chosen plays one after the other to shape the way the audience views each piece. Instead of two plays, I chose to stage the interview directly before the scene from *Oleanna*, in order to give the audience the social and political context of the play before showing them an excerpt of the play itself.

At the end of the interview, Mamet claims that the play's final scene, in which Carol is physically beaten by John, was the "logical conclusion" (as cited in LaSalle, 2014, para. 34) of a play about a

young woman filing a sexual harassment claim. To emphasize how problematic it is for an industry to worship a man who promotes that kind of thought, I wrote the following line to be spoken by the actor who played Carol after the scene closed: “If an affluent playwright says that the logical conclusion to a woman speaking against an affluent man is her getting the shit beaten out of her, and we’re here speaking out against the affluent playwright, should we be scared?” (*Big Daddy Lives or Don’t Say the F Word* script, 2019, p. 12).

A Doll’s House: Cross-Gender Casting

Finally, a scene from the quintessential canonical play *A Doll’s House*, by Henrik Ibsen, was staged with one key difference: the main female character, Nora, was played by a man and the main male character, Torvald, was played by a woman. *A Doll’s House* was celebrated by first wave feminists when it was first produced in 1879 for its provocative ending, which shows Nora leaving Torvald and their children to go and find herself. The play did not, however, withstand the test of time from a feminist perspective. Today, its representations of traditional gender roles and painfully ditzzy character of Nora make the play seem far from the feminist triumph of its early days. The decision to include a scene from this play was twofold. First, it is an assigned text in several courses at the Phoenix, making it a relevant piece to experiment with, as much of the audience would be intimately familiar with. Second, I wanted to explore the often-invisibilized role that gender plays in the marital dynamic between Nora and Torvald. I chose to change the gender of each character to match the actor playing that character. Nora became the husband and Torvald became the wife. Other than altering the gendered pronouns in the piece, I left the script the same.

Evaluation and Findings

In this section, I break my evaluation of the project and my findings down into three categories: 1) the feminist directing process, 2) successes of my process, and 3) challenges posed by my process.

The Feminist Directing Process

Directing with an intersectional feminist framework differed from the traditional directing process in a number of ways. First, the hierarchy was broken down; as the director, I was not seen as the only one capable of making creative decisions or coming up with ideas. During the focus group, this came up several times. Darius describes his experience of being a part of the project as follows:

DARIUS: As opposed to traditional theatre [...] I’ve definitely noticed that, in this project, I was asked a lot about what I’m comfortable with, am I ok doing this? [...] It’s like what you were saying, Tabatha, about, some directors or some, um, productions out there that will cut corners just to, you know, to meet the end dates and like, that is priority. But it seemed like, throughout this process, we were priority.

By treating the actors as co-creators and co-researchers, the process became much more democratic.

Secondly, this approach required much more rehearsal time to be allotted for discussion than in a traditional approach. During the first rehearsal, for example, we spent three hours in discussion setting ground rules for how to work together in a productive and respectful way and examining the concept of intersectionality and spent time exploring the script reflexively and connecting the work to our own experience and identity.

The third difference I have noted between my process and traditional processes is that the focus was taken off of achieving technical excellence. Instead, we explored how best to achieve our goals

for the show and how we wanted to impact the audience. As Lucien, who played Actor 2, Mick LaSalle, and Nora, put it,

LUCIEN: The way that I can think of the way we did it is, you weren't working with just actors, you weren't working with just characters, you were working with both of them in tandem.

What Lucien describes is a shift away from realism, from objectives, from given circumstances, and towards an intersectional approach, where the intersecting identities of both character and actor are taken into account throughout the process.

Strengths of Intersectional Feminist Directing

The greatest strength of the process used throughout this project was the way it allowed me, as the director, to work and connect with the actors as equals. The educational approach to directing that was undertaken in the third project objective (expose a team of student actors, designers, and stage management to feminist theatre practices and literature) resulted in the actors feeling like they were able to grow as artists and as people while working on the project:

DARIUS: And, with this sort of theme that we were working with, also . . . embracing feminism, I learned a lot of things and now can say that I feel so much more comfortable being me. From before to after this show [...]

ANNIE: There was one moment where I was talking about compulsory heterosexuality and bisexuality and Darius turned to me and went, "You're like my role model."

(Laughter)

DARIUS: I found. . . oh man. . . I found so much mentorship in this project. And guidance that I really needed in life.

In terms of evaluating the first two objectives, I cannot speak for the audience, but the actors identified the effort we, as a company, put into making the show entertaining, as well as educational, as a strength of the final product. As Annie explains it,

ANNIE: I'm glad, though, that part of us, like, approaching this kind of topic was that we did still think about what was fun to watch. And what would be interesting to watch [...] there was music and there was still that element of, like, you're watching a show and you're meant to kinda—you're meant to think and you're meant to ask questions—but at the same time there were moments in which you were allowed to laugh.

Making a confrontational show critiquing the theatre in which it is being performed fun and humorous is not an easy task. The collaborative nature of this process allowed us all to work together to find ways to present the material that could best facilitate the audience's reception and understanding of our message. For example, the group had the idea of devising comical silent scenes to perform during the voiceovers of David and William Ball's quotes. Because the quotations are blatantly sexist and, quite frankly, a bit depressing, having the actors mimicking what the voiceover was saying kept the mood light, while simultaneously satirizing the absurd claims that have been made by prominent theatre practitioners.

Challenges of Intersectional Feminist Directing

The largest challenge the company faced during the rehearsal process was the fear of failure. As Donkin and Clement (1993) suggest, a feminist director “has to be forewarned and forearmed against the jovial, generous, and disabling presence of Big Daddy, in her audience, in her script, in her cast and crew, but, most alarmingly, in her own head” (p. 8). Early in the rehearsal process, the actors, the stage manager, and I struggled to let go of what was familiar to us. It took some trial and error to fine-tune our collective process, and to accept, collectively, that the process of creating together should be highly valued, regardless of the result.

Additionally, devising parts of the show posed a unique challenge for the company. Making devised theatre is often a challenging process, but in this case, I did not so much as have the luxury of knowing how much devising we would be doing ahead of time because I wanted the group to decide what they wanted to create. Because we worked with both scripted and devised content, the actors expressed a need for more guidance on how to collaborate appropriately when devising versus rehearsing the scripted scenes. For example, Annie described the challenge of providing constructive feedback to fellow actors in a positive way:

ANNIE: [...] when it came to like, writing things in the room [referring to devising exercises]... Sometimes, it’s hard to gauge with everyone exactly...

DARIUS: Where you can be constructive?

ANNIE: Yeah. Or where you can be destructive to them.

In hindsight, it may have benefitted the ensemble to have a discussion about giving and receiving feedback at the beginning of the rehearsal period, perhaps as a part of the development of the group agreement. Regardless of the challenge devising posed, however, feedback was an extremely important part of the project. To borrow from Lipkin’s (2016) definition of devising, utilizing devising methods allowed us to “collectively create original and specific performances that could never exist without the participation of the particular people involved in a certain period of time” (p. 255).

Conclusion

As a student finishing my fourth year in an undergraduate theatre program, my mind has been plagued with questions about the problematic nature of the industry in which I hope to work. Why am I constantly asked to study plays by dead white men? Why haven’t I learned about women’s contributions to the history of theatre? Why are courses that incorporate feminism taught as specialized electives and not made a part of the mandatory curriculum? Will my marks suffer if I interpret a classic play with a feminist lens? *Big Daddy Lives or Don’t Say the F Word* was my humble attempt to explore those questions, to make those questions heard, and to encourage others to ask their own questions. The opening monologue of the show invites the audience to do just that: “We are both students and teachers in this room. All of us. We can learn together, and we can teach each other. Consider our questions. Consider our answers. Then, please, for the love of God, come up with better ones” (*Big Daddy Lives or Don’t Say the F Word* script, p. 1).

I hope that this project will provide a solid foundation on which other theatre practitioners, scholars, and artists can build, play, create, and explore the way Big Daddy has shaped their creative experience, disappointments, and triumphs. I hope that feminist directors can learn from my successes and mistakes in order to develop their own theories of directing that prioritize collaboration and mutual education, and that can be used to create wonderful pieces of theatre.

Above all, I hope that practitioners and scholars of both gender studies and theatre will look to this project as an example of why the disciplines do not make an odd combination, but rather a productive one, a lively one, and a necessary one.

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