



Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender

by Jim Volz. Written on 2013-05-01. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender.

VISIONARY THEATRE ARTIST LISA WOLPE IS PERHAPS BEST KNOWN AS THE PRODUCING ARTISTIC Director of the LA Women's Shakespeare Company, the award-winning company that produces professional productions of Shakespeare's plays with an all-female, multiracial ensemble in Southern California. Oregon Shakespeare, Berkeley Rep, Shakespeare & Company, Arizona Theater Company and many other theatres throughout America have featured Ms. Wolpe's talents but *Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender* is a unique, poignant and intense amalgam of all things Wolpe and Shakespeare.

Finding celebration and solace in the words and enchanting power of Shakespeare, Ms. Wolpe explores the courageous, often tragic, always fascinating history of her troubled family— weaving personal photos, video and glorious passages from *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Twelfth Night*, *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Similar to a fresh telling of *R&J*, Ms. Wolpe's story wreaks havoc on the heart as the catastrophic circumstances of her family history would be too much to bear if not for the liberation and catharsis that this valiant performer discovers (and the audience shares) in the telling of it.

The performance venue was the lovely and intimate Ruth B. Shannon Center for the Performing Arts at Whittier College in California and the solo show was paired with a "TO BE OR NOT TO BE: CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO" panel discussion featuring gender and performance experts Cynthia Ruffin, Elizabeth Swain, Kevin Vavasseur and Lisa Wolpe, moderated by Dr. Jennifer Sage Holmes. Panel topics ranged from gender fluidity, bullying and same-sex casting to gender expectations, isolation and Why Shakespeare?

Ms. Wolpe refers to the show as a work in progress and, in her own words, she is "attempting to contextualize the way I interpret the cross-gender experience of performing Shakespeare, seen through the lens of my personal history and the prismatic concepts of the Elizabethan Renaissance." This may sound woefully academic but it's actually (and remarkably) theatrical— Ms. Wolpe knows how to tell stories, personal and Shakespearean, and she does so with power

and panache. Her Romeo is bold and flirtatious, Hamlet is wracked with uncertainty and Shylock reveals a determined, well-reasoned, revengeful soul.

Through the words of Shakespeare, Ms. Wolpe tackles contemporary political and social issues, offers perspectives on the haunting influences of war, violence and victimization and provides a glimpse of the resilience, hope and humanity that makes a life worth living. She's equally adept at telling her own story and the many tales told together result in an engaging, heartrending, satisfying time in the theatre.

Jim Volz is an international arts consultant, author, producer, and professor based in Orange County at California State University, Fullerton. He served as a longtime critic/arts columnist for New York's Back Stage and founding editor of the Shakespeare Theatre Association's international magazine, Quarto. He has produced over 100 professional productions, consulted for over 100 arts institutions and published more than 100 articles on management, arts criticism, Shakespeare, and theatre in American Theatre, Oxford University Press's Theatre Research International, Hollywood's Drama-Logue and myriad other articles for national and international publications. He is a Ph.D. graduate from the University of Colorado, Boulder. jvolz@fullerton.edu