

Abstracts

Dialectical Images of Femininity – a strategy of resistance in performance practice

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As performance-practitioner, academic and pedagogue my interest lies within the development of strategies of resistance – in particular strategies of resisting femininity – in performance practice. Within the context my recent PaR PhD *On hair, fishtails and voices – resisting femininity in contemporary performance practice* I identified, investigated and developed three of these strategies: dialectical images of femininity; performing an abject body; fictionalising the body. This paper focuses on the first of those, namely the creation of dialectical images of femininity. Calling upon Peggy Phelan's notion of the unmarked and disappearance in tandem with Walter Benjamin's concept of a dialectical image, I investigate Bobby Baker's *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* as one example of the creation of a dialectical image of femininity, before turning my attention to my own practice in the context of Baker's workshop *Box Story*. I propose that placing Phelan's post-Lacanian feminist theory alongside a materialist dialectical approach results in a potent – if at times disharmonious – partnership. It enables an investigation of a woman performer's specificities often neglected in the abstract generalisations of a purely psychoanalytical feminism, such as Luce Irigaray's and/or Julia Kristeva's theories that lack explorations of differences in ethnicity, age, sexuality and economic status. Although this paper draws heavily on a theoretical framework, it is imperative to note that the identification, exploration and eventual application of dialectical images of femininity began in the actual performance space.

Family Roles and Paternal/Maternal Genealogies within and between Psychophysical Performer Trainings and their Documentation

Alissa Clarke (University of Exeter)

Where psychophysical performer trainings draw upon the inspiration of earlier psychophysical practices, one can situate the practitioners, their work, and the transmission and documentation of their work within a genealogical structure. In the twentieth century, male performer trainers dominated psychophysical fields of practice, and thus the content and authorship of writings, further transmitting these practices. However, the presence of, and knowledge about, women within these practices and writings is now becoming far more evident. Nevertheless, the practices and writings of those male performer trainers who began work in the twentieth-century are frequently treated as canonical, and this canonical positioning serves to discursively construct and uphold a dominant paradigm of a powerful 'genealogy of sons and fathers' (Irigaray qtd. in Whitford, 'Section 1' 23).

In this article, I argue that this dominant paternal paradigm cannot account for all the possible modes of transmission within and between psychophysical performer trainings and their documentation. I demonstrate how Julia Varley's work with The Magdalena Project and *The Open Page*, and the practices of Sandra Reeve and Phillip Zarrilli negotiate with and provide direct alternatives or opposition to this dominant genealogy. This material is placed in dialogue with Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray's depictions of subversive maternal genealogies and multiple and intermixed family roles. I argue that the maternal structures and discourses about the family created by these trainings offer valuable and non-essentialist ways of reflecting upon and utilising the positioning of gender and family roles within the processes, transmission and documentation of these trainings.

Articulating the Subject: Metamorphosis in Marina Carr's *The Mai*

Shonagh Hill (Queen's University Belfast)

Through exploration of the trope of metamorphosis in Marina Carr's *The Mai*, I will offer a positive interpretation of the central character's suicide as a creative process. Death has been interpreted in Carr's plays as an admission of defeat by the central women; however, examination of the staging of *The Mai*'s suicide can enable a more positive reading. Irish women playwrights have a tradition of using myth to explore their role within the symbolic, and metamorphosis can enable an exploration of how cultural signification and corporeal performance create identity. I will examine metamorphosis in *The Mai* to address whether it can suggest an elsewhere which can accommodate female subjectivity. Through the lens of Judith Butler's theories of performativity, rematerialization and abjection, I will address possible strategies for subversion and sources of creativity for the female body within the constraints of patriarchal structures. Butler's theories are employed in tandem with Paul Ricoeur's work on myth which addresses the liberating possibilities of creating 'other possible worlds.' As an intersection of the material and the discursive, metamorphosis questions the stability of boundaries and social norms, but can it offer a radical transformation of both the metamorphosed person and the space around them? In order to address whether reinterpretation of *The Mai*'s metamorphoses can enable a more positive reading of her suicide and afford her political agency, I will focus on the staging of these metamorphoses in three different productions: the 1994 Peacock Theatre Dublin production, the 1995 Abbey tour and the 1996 version at the McCarter Theater.

Little (White) Women: Locating Whiteness in (De)constructions of the American Female from Alcott to Split Britches

Courtney Elkin Mohler (California State University)

In 1988, the feminist/lesbian performance group Split Britches performed a deconstruction of Louisa May Alcott's canonical *Little Women*. Their play, *Little Women, the Tragedy (LWTT)* highlighted the division within the feminist movement at the time over pornography, and called into question the norms of morality and feminine virtue reflected in and by Alcott's classic 'American girls' novel.' The play, however, illustrates a problematic construction of feminist/lesbian identity as outside of racial discourse. This paper argues that feminist performances which aim to deconstruct gender and sexuality should also be examined in terms of racialization; the common omission of whiteness as a category of identification can undermine the political goals of feminists of colour and white feminists alike. I briefly describe how *Little Women* constructs the American female as moral, heterosexual and of 'white' European descent. The paper then illustrates how *LWTT* seems to ignore the actors'/characters' positions as belonging to the racial majority. This piece's ability to expose oppressive systems of identity construction relies on the whiteness of the actors' bodies and characterizations. This reliance indicates a critical gap between how feminists of colour and white feminists approached the performance of sexuality and morality during the 1980s, revealing historical and social inequities between groups of women.

Unconventional Femininity in the Works of Suzan-Lori Parks and Marina Carr
Siobhán O' Gorman (National University of Ireland Galway)

By examining the work of Marina Carr and Suzan-Lori Parks, this paper explores the ways in which women's writing within the western institution of theatre challenges our perceptions of femininity and exposes the performativity of gender. Each of these playwrights became more successful as her work moved towards more traditional styles of theatre. My argument is that, although the movement of these playwrights towards more 'patriarchal' styles can be viewed in a negative light from a feminist perspective, productive feminist meanings can still be provided by such works through their denaturalizations of gender. Drawing on Judith Butler's essay, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', the paper offers detailed analyses of Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and Parks's *In the Blood* (1999) in terms of unconventional femininity and performativity. This article argues that the protagonists of these plays fail to perform culturally acceptable femininity and consequentially suffer what Butler would consider to be the 'punitive' actions of society (reprimanding and social exclusion). These marginalized protagonists usurp cultural paradigms of femininity and ultimately reveal gender as a repetitious social performance. The use of realist conventions has contributed to the mainstream success of these playwrights, allowing such feminist themes to reach a wider audience.

Staging Humanity in *Cranberry: The Human Revelation of Joan Crawford*
Matt Saltzberg (University of Missouri-Columbia)

For the past two years, I have been developing and performing a solo performance piece entitled *Cranberry: The Human Revelation of Joan Crawford*, in which I play Academy Award-winner Joan Crawford. The text is based on an interview with Crawford conducted by entertainment journalist Arthur Unger, found among his papers at the University of Missouri-Columbia's Western Historical Manuscript Collection. Citing the work of Judith Butler, Jill Dolan, Laurence Senelick, and Esther Newton, the article discusses at length my performance of Joan Crawford, specifically in regards to my gender confounding, non-drag portrayal of the cinematic legend. Discovering, in the end, that my staging of the complexities of gender present neither man nor woman, but human, I dare to ask the audience to see Joan Crawford not as a glamorized monster, but as a living and breathing human being.