

## **Staging Humanity in *Cranberry: The Human Revelation of Joan Crawford***

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‘Everyone wants to be right. Since that’s impossible let’s just settle for being human.’  
Joan Crawford, *A Portrait of Joan* (122)

### **Beginnings**

At the same time as I was enrolled in an auto/biographical performance course at the University of Missouri-Columbia, my colleague Kevin Babbitt was working with the archived papers of Arthur Unger, an entertainment journalist perhaps best remembered as the television critic for the *Christian Science Monitor*. When Babbitt came to speak with my class about his process, he jokingly referenced a transcript of Unger’s interview with Academy Award-winning American actress Joan Crawford, the star of such iconic films as *The Women*, *Mildred Pierce*, and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, who is remembered by most for her infamous feud with rival Bette Davis, her daughter Christina’s book *Mommie Dearest*, and its subsequent feature film adaptation that shattered Crawford’s professional and personal reputation. The casual mention of the Crawford interview prompted my classmates to implore me to ‘do Joan Crawford!’ I eventually relented, thinking it would be fun to jump on the *Mommie Dearest* bandwagon and develop a drag performance of Joan Crawford, playing her in all her Hollywood glory.

However, I derailed my original plans after reading the archived materials. Unger interviewed Crawford at her Manhattan apartment in 1958 for a special feature in *Datebook*, a now-defunct magazine for teenage girls. After initial reluctance, Crawford agreed to do the interview on Unger’s promise that he wouldn’t publish her words unless

they actually proved constructive for young girls. Although Unger left with the realization that he did not have a story for his magazine, he transcribed his notes and edited them into narrative form. According to Unger, in the interview, Crawford spoke candidly and sometimes tearfully about her difficulties with her adopted children Christina and Christopher, as well as her own troubled childhood. The more I read, the more I found myself agreeing with Unger about the ‘fascinating and revealing’ nature of the interview, becoming more and more engrossed in this rare glimpse into the normally guarded life of a movie star (Letter). I thought that by breathing life into the pages of this forgotten, dust-laden manuscript I might, even in some small way, move people to see a tarnished screen legend in a light different to that which has been cast on her. The manner through which I might communicate this sensibility in a concrete, tangible way to an audience became the focus of the adaptation and staging process.

### **Reconstruction**

The piece itself, a forty minute play entitled *Cranberry: The Human Revelation of Joan Crawford*, consists of two characters – Arthur Unger and Joan Crawford – to be played by one actor, only differentiated through changes in voice and physicality. As in the original manuscript, the Unger character functions in two separate frames: one in which he speaks with Crawford in her apartment in 1958, and another in which he speaks with the audience in the present, commenting on his ‘scenes’ with Crawford. Crawford, however, only appears in the 1958 frame.

I began the adaptation process armed with the knowledge that I wanted to feature as many of Crawford’s words in the performance as possible. Structurally, the interview

lent itself to being transformed into a dramatic work, since Unger's thirty-page manuscript was not a direct word-for-word transcription. Although the entirety of my piece comes from Unger's manuscript, I do not perform the manuscript verbatim nor do I perform it in its entirety: I rearranged and, at times, reappropriated action and dialogue, to solidify the structure and maximize what I saw as the manuscript's full dramatic potential. As I combed through the interview, I initially chose to include dialogue that appealed to my emotions: comments made by Crawford that, based on my research, I thought were intriguing and would play well in a theatrical setting.

Throughout the writing process, I constantly had to make decisions about what to include in my text and what to leave out. Though my own bias towards Crawford grew exponentially, I'd like to think that *Cranberry* presented a somewhat balanced Crawford, as I did not shy away from embracing, for example, her sometimes harsh words in reference to Christina and Christopher, which could potentially cast her in a negative light. In 'Searching for the Real Calamity Jane,' M. Heather Carver acknowledges the difficulties of portraying an infamous historical figure, but states that 'it is more important to show the complexities of the self in performance' (97). If I was going to show Crawford in all her complexity, as Carver suggests, then it would be anathema to erase the nuances reported by Unger. Instead, I chose, in Carver's words, to 'engage in raising questions about identity rather than [make] authoritative statements about historical or personal narratives' ('Risky Business' 27). As opposed to merely revisiting the historicized Joan Crawford, I sought to look at her through the new lens provided by Unger's manuscript, in an attempt to chip away at her monster-mommy status and restore her humanity.

## **Empathy**

This notion of humanity – the condition of *being human* – became increasingly important in my work with Crawford, as I laboured with my own understanding of what humanity is: a stripping away, a vulnerability, a laying bare, a nakedness. Thus, I began my project by submersing myself in the panoply of material on Crawford's life and career, excavating the material for all I deemed useful. I read several biographies, including those by Laurence J. Quirk and William Schoell, Charlotte Chandler, and David Bret; Crawford's autobiography, *A Portrait of Joan*, Roy Newquist's interview collection *Conversations with Joan Crawford*, Christina Crawford's ubiquitous *Mommie Dearest*, and watched the retrospective documentary *Joan Crawford, Always the Star*. Investigating these items exposed the fact that there is little unbiased, critical interrogation of Crawford's personal and professional life. Thus, it became clear that I would have to make fundamental decisions based on my own interpretation of this research. Submerging myself in all things Crawford allowed several personal connections between Crawford and myself to bubble to the surface, causing an unexpected sense of empathy to rise within me. I found myself relating to her difficult and disjointed childhood, her intense desire to be taken seriously as an artist, her persistent work ethic, and her deep yearning to give and receive love and forge honest human connections.

Performance artist Anna Deavere Smith, famous for her portrayals of real-life and historical individuals, tells us that 'an ability to identify with the other is called empathy. That empathy is a proof of humanity' (*Talk to Me* 71). 'Acting,' she says elsewhere, 'is the ability to believe that you are someone else: that you could be in someone else's shoes. It is the ability to create with your body an image of that person that resonates

through your attempt to *feel* as that person' (*Letters* 140). While Smith's notion of performing the other is powerful, I wanted to move beyond merely being in Crawford's shoes. Experimental theatre director Anne Bogart takes Smith's ideas a step further, writing:

Empathy allows an audience not only to enjoy the big theatrical brushstrokes but also to identify and relate to the event personally. The human heartbeat serves as the red thread through any theatrical labyrinth and will lead to the vulnerability at [the] center of the event. This humanity allows an audience to access the experience personally and intimately. Empathy is the ability to identify and understand another person's situation or to transfer your own feelings and emotions to them [...] When we lose our capacity to empathize, we lose an essential part of our humanity. (65-7)

If empathy is the ability to allow the other in, to feel what the other is feeling, then it was my hope that, through *my* ability to let Crawford in, through *my* willingness to lay bare Crawford's 'human heartbeat' and see her as more vulnerable, audiences might experience in their own way what I had already been feeling.

In my effort to communicate my newfound personal and professional respect and admiration for Crawford, I made the choice to take the following partisan statement from Quirk and Schoell's 'essential' biography as a touchstone:

Joan was not a perfect human being – who is? – but for her hard work alone she deserves better than what she has gotten since the publication of *Mommie Dearest*. Being a movie star was serious business to her, and she worked harder at her career and at her acting than perhaps any other star in Hollywood. She was in no way a freak or a monster, and she does not deserve to be a national joke [...] [A] career like hers deserves to be looked at with objectivity, her abilities analyzed honestly. (xi)

Of course, through my decision to support this statement, my performance work would, necessarily, be far from 'objective,' and 'honesty' is a problematic idea when venturing to portray a historical figure. Nevertheless, the sensibility of what Quirk and Schoell

suggest – the revisioning of an important American cultural icon – is what I sought to achieve with my performance piece.



Fig 1. In this monologue, Crawford remembers her daughter Christina asking for help rehearsing lines for a school play. Crawford admits it was one of the few times she felt her daughter really respected her.

Photo by Ryan McNeil.

## **Images**

Understanding that my performance would be my version of Unger's version of Crawford, I entered the rehearsal space for the first time with the notion of 'raising questions about identity', wanting to bring audiences close to Crawford, making transparent her outer veneer of 'movie star,' and allowing a glimpse into her humanness.

Finally faced with the immense task of putting Crawford ‘on her feet,’ I was struck by an all-important question: If I was attempting to revitalize a much-satirized American icon, how do I, a short, stocky man, endeavour to portray her without further proliferating her commonly accepted artificial, affected persona?

The photographic retrospective *Legends: Joan Crawford* contains a picture taken by George Hurrell for 1935’s *I Live My Life*. It is an image of Crawford’s face, framed – nearly obscured – by total darkness. The picture is an extreme close-up in which Crawford is wearing no make-up; all her normally concealed blemishes, wrinkles, and freckles are laid bare. Although photographs are open to individual interpretation, what I saw in this rare, naked image of Crawford was a glimpse of that illusive sense of humanity my performance was attempting to enact. How do I get at this bareness, at this sense of simplicity, I asked myself. How do I strip away the cultural baggage that has accumulated on the Crawford persona, and present *this* image of Crawford in which, I felt, she was asking to be seen as a human being rather than a commodity or a mere image on a screen?

What is also striking about the picture is that the photograph virtually erases Crawford’s outward femininity. Indeed, if taken out of context, the gender of the figure in the photo might not be readily apparent. This was a key discovery, as Crawford herself, well known for her close relationships with homosexual men, embodied a complex gender identity. She was a rumoured bisexual; several Crawford biographers, including Bret, and Quirk and Schoell report on intimate affairs with actresses Barbara Stanwyck and Tallulah Bankhead. Furthermore, Crawford was a pioneer in her adoption of children while unmarried, and in the intensity with which she drove her career, refusing to be

relegated to the role of the typically marginalized woman of her era. An examination of Crawford's film career uncovers what Quirk and Schoell term a 'masculine approach' to her roles, displaying in such films as *Johnny Guitar* and *Autumn Leaves* a toughness and a 'steely outer shell' that masked 'the insecure woman underneath' (176, 193). In her essay 'Gender Impersonation Onstage,' feminist scholar Jill Dolan explores the plasticity of gender identity. She challenges the role of the stage as a mirror that reflects cultural and social organization, recognizing that 'the stage, then, is a proper place to explore gender ambiguity, not to expunge it cathartically from society but to play with, confound, and deconstruct gender categories [...] If we stop considering the stage as a mirror of reality, we can use it as a laboratory in which to reconstruct new [...] identities' (8). Perhaps, by highlighting the fact that I was a gay man willing to play an oft-parodied female cultural icon *outside* the realm of satire, I might demonstrate for spectators my notion of humanity by experimenting with confounding gender identities.

## **Drag**

Drag has roots in theatrical conventions that can be traced back to classical Greece. 'In particular,' says gender and performance scholar Lesley Ferris, 'the comedies of Aristophanes use the charade of gender costume – specifically the dress of women – as a wild comic device,' in which the physical attributes of the characters were exaggerated and made grotesque (20-1). Two millennia later, some drag performers of Crawford's era, such as T.C. Jones and Charles Pierce similarly considered their work a gimmick, 'always in the service of satire' (Senelick, *Changing Room* 386). However, the idea of a comical, hyperbolized Joan Crawford is the exact opposite of what I was seeking to



conjure. Dolan takes the argument a step further by pointing out drag's camp context, which she feels removes female impersonation from 'the realm of serious gender play and deconstruction' (5). 'Women are nonexistent in drag performance,' Dolan continues, 'but woman-as-myth, as a cultural, ideological object, is constructed [...] Male drag mirrors women's socially constructed roles' (6).

Moreover, even though contemporary drag performers, such as Craig Russell and Jim Bailey, repudiate the term 'female impersonator' and seek not to impersonate, but to *recreate* out of a genuine sense of care for their subjects, I had to consider the researcher's reflexivity. The damage to Crawford's reputation has been done. I realized that no matter how carefully I endeavoured to portray her, the minute I stepped onto the stage in heels and a wig, I would be dragging that stigma onto the stage with me. I felt if I appeared in full Crawford regalia, many would not be able to see past the female costume on the male body, and into the inner layer of Crawford's humanity I intended to capture through my performative choices.

I therefore decided to use as neutral a costume as possible: I chose clothing that was neither decidedly masculine nor feminine, in an effort to project an unadorned blank slate that aided in the transformation of my body into the gender-conflating threshold I aimed to create.. Based on the sleek darkness of Hurrell's photo, I decided on non-gender specific black slacks and a simple black turtleneck shirt. Rather than donning a pair of shoes, which can be extremely gender specific, I felt the nakedness of my feet allowed me to return to a more primal state in which I was connected with the natural world, as I attempted to present 'human,' rather than a gendered, sexualized construction.

## Technique

In his introduction to *Gender in Performance*, Laurence Senelick employs anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of the *liminal*, a period of time when a person is betwixt and between social categories or personal identities,. Problematizing the relationship between gender and performance, Senelick states that, because the theatre has been a safe-house for unconventional behaviour, 'commonly accepted reality may be inverted [...] within this space' (xi). Accordingly, by embodying a plastic notion of gender, in which I was neither male *nor* female, I sought to revision the humanity of Joan Crawford *through* the denaturalization of socially accepted norms of gender.

Here, it is helpful to bring into the discussion how I used the Suzuki method to help achieve what I consider a liminal threshold in my performance. A physically rigorous technique founded on the codified forms of *kabuki* and martial arts and the metaphysical aesthetics of *noh*, the Suzuki forms, called the 'grammar of the feet,' are executed barefoot, in an effort to gather energy from the earth. Furthermore, by reconnecting the actor to his/her primal energy, Suzuki training transforms the actor into a threshold, or a *limen* (to borrow a term from Turner), a thin passageway between places rather than a place itself, linking one space to another, an 'instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance' ('Liminal to Liminoid' 206). In ritual performance, the thin space of the limen is widened, both actually and conceptually: what is usually a go-between becomes the site of the action, containing freedom and the potentiality for the formation of new ideas, symbols, models, and beliefs. Turner called this liberation from the constraints of ordinary life 'anti-structure' (*Ritual Process* 127-28). One of the tenets of Suzuki training is that it pushes actors beyond the

confines of their perceived limitations, connecting them to a higher, liminal plane of seeing, feeling, and understanding. This connection between the mundane world and a more holistic mode of awareness allowed me to liberate gender from its constraints and push *it* beyond its perceived limitations. Thus, through the ritual of embodying the Crawford character in performance, I allowed my body to form new ideas and become the site of a ‘new’ model of gender, and thus a ‘new,’ humanized Joan Crawford.

### **Body**

Although I chose *not* to perform in drag, I did choose to approximate Crawford’s vocal and physical mannerisms. I played with gender by not *formalizing* that play: I entered the rehearsal space without a set plan, allowing my imagination and creativity to flow freely, deliberately choosing to not to focus all my attention on the fact that I was an effete man layering on the corporeal particularities of a mannish woman. Rather than concern myself with reconstituting the societal construct of ‘woman,’ I was attempting to find my way into the internal image of Crawford exposed in Hurrell’s bare photograph. My thought process was that if I ‘just did it,’ if I just let my own features speak for Crawford within the threshold of my body, I could force spectators to see beyond the mannered persona of Crawford they were likely expecting and discover my notion of Crawford’s *humanity*.

Highly influential gender and performance scholar Judith Butler writes that

gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (191)

My body is certainly stylized in my performance of Crawford. Well aware that I was recreating Crawford’s physical and vocal idiosyncrasies, I watched a plethora of her films

(including *Straight Jacket*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Susan and God*, *The Women*, *The Story of Esther Costello*, *Strange Cargo*, *Queen Bee*, *A Woman's Face*, *Rain*, and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*). Focusing especially on those in which she played a mother, I looked for vocal and physical similarities, attempting to capture what John Gentile calls a person's 'elusive essence,' using 'the potency of suggestion as a technique to convey the spirit of [a] character' (143-44). I attempted to imitate her voice, with its husky pitch and perfect diction, and her physicality, with its sharp, direct movements. I attempted to recreate the angle at which she held her head, with her chin slightly pointed up, as well as her brisk, direct, chest-first manner of walking. The movement of her arms was also important, as they are usually held in tension: down at her sides with her fists clenched, clasped tightly in front of her, or with one arm across her midsection, and the other resting on it in a ninety-degree angle, allowing her hand to gesture or lie on her sternum.

Butler writes that,

such [stylized] acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs [...] That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (185)

If it is true that gender only exists in relation to the actions the body endeavours to perform, then as a gay man hazarding to enact a 'straight' portrayal of a female personage relegated to the realm satire, I exposed the illusion of a socially constructed, gendered self through the stylization of my body. Agreeing with Butler that '[t]he body is not a "being," but a variable boundary,' I dared to make visible within the liminal threshold of my body the entirely *human* side of Joan Crawford so vividly captured in Hurrell's picture (189). Rather than presenting a decidedly male or female construct, I necessarily

blended Crawford's masculine femininity with my feminine masculinity, exposing what Butler calls the 'construction of coherence' that 'conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally,' a 'fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe' (185).

### **Performance**

In actual performance, I was aided in my explication of the plasticity of gender by the fact that I was required to play both Crawford *and* Unger, himself an effete homosexual. Thus, not only was I able to confound gender while embodying the Crawford character, I was also able to confound gender by *shifting* character. These shifts are done simply, and are enacted *only* through the physical movements of my body. There is no better example of this transformation than Crawford's first appearance. After Unger, a small, hunched, high-voiced, frenetic character, discusses his arrival at Crawford's apartment, the audience watches as he slowly morphs into the iconic Joan Crawford. In an instant, I present the audience two apparently conflicting notions of gender that dart across the threshold of the same body, harkening back to Turner's notion of the *liminal*. The entire performance unfolds as a series of these transformations, demonstrating Butler's dictum that 'the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and [...] true gender [...] a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies' (186).



Fig. 2. Crawford's first appearance. My rigid posture, angled gesture, and sharp gaze are enacted with an effort to render Crawford powerful and iconic.  
Photo by Ryan McNeil.

## **Conclusions**

My experience from performing this piece has led me to agree with Anna Deavere Smith, who believes that performance artists, as caretakers and creators of culture and the human condition, give 'us the allowance to imagine things another way;' (*Letters* 6). How we live and how we treat each other is what should be at stake in the artist's work. Smith writes: 'One of the best things about being an artist [...] is [...] sharing vulnerabilities, sharing the things that make us human [...] We take a chance, and walk with [...] the

pain of others – in order to tell their stories perhaps – to let them know someone understands’ (*Letters* 45, 166). Thus, my gender-confounding work with Crawford showed me that part of being human means we must see beyond socially constructed roles. By ‘proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality,’ says Butler, ‘gender can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*’ (192-3). Towards this end, perhaps my work has rescued the complexity of Crawford that Unger never found.

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