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male roles in Shakespeare.**

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Abstract: *This article discusses the theatrical practice of women performing traditionally male roles in Shakespeare. Whilst historically the phenomenon is nothing new, since the 1970s the practice has been particularly associated with the politics of feminism. This article proposes to examine this connection in order to explore how far the convention of casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare has been influenced by changing social, political, and cultural discourses. It will do so by considering two specific manifestations of the theatrical practice: firstly, the National Theatre’s 1995/6 Richard II directed by Deborah Warner, in which Fiona Shaw played the eponymous male character and secondly the 2012/13 all-female Julius Caesar, directed by Phyllida Lloyd for the Donmar Warehouse. Moreover, it will locate these two productions, separated by seventeen years and the turn of a century, within their specific historical, theatrical, and theoretical contexts. Through an analysis of the material conditions that gave rise to the contemporary receptions of these two productions, the objective of this article is to draw conclusions concerning the differing ways in which, through casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare, theatre practitioners have created particular theatrical conversations with their audiences.*

Key words: Shakespeare; Theatre; Women; Cross-gender; Feminism; Reception.

Contemporary Female Casting

On the 16th January 2014, a new piece of theatre opened on the South Bank in London. It ran until the 23rd February at The Shed, The National Theatre’s temporary venue tasked with ‘celebrating new theatre that is adventurous, ambitious and unexpected’ (<http://www.theshed.nationaltheatre.org.uk>). With poetry by Michaela Coel, the piece was created by playwright, Nick Payne and theatre director, Carrie Cracknell, who worked with a company of eight actresses to devise a freshly minted theatrical event. The show took its title

from the 2013 hit, the multi-million selling Robin Thicke song, *Blurred Lines*. Reviewing the theatre event, the Guardian critic, Lyn Gardner, concluded that it ‘cunningly exposed gender inequality’, describing the piece as a ‘niftily staged sketch-style show inspired by Kat Banyard’s book, *The Equality Illusion*, and created by a superb all-female cast (a rare sight in itself on our male-dominated stage)’ (Gardner, 2014: 34).

All-female casts are indeed a rare sight in British theatre, where male actors consistently outnumber women on most stages. It is not, however, a scenario that is as uncommon as once it was. In 2013, I saw four all-female productions. Moreover, these were not pieces of newly written drama, but productions of Shakespearean plays: one all-woman *Henry V*; one all-female *Hamlet*; an all-female *Taming of the Shrew* that the reconstructed Shakespeare’s Globe sent out to many and various venues on an international tour; and an all-female *Julius Caesar*, directed by Phyllida Lloyd and produced by the Donmar Warehouse. This latter production transferred to the St Ann’s Warehouse, New York in the autumn of 2013. In the same year, the all-women company ‘Smooth-faced Gentlemen’ took *Titus Andronicus* to the Edinburgh Festival and Cardiff-based director, Yvonne Murphy, was publicly funded to establish a troupe with the sole remit of playing all-women Shakespeare.

This suggests that there is currently an appetite among audiences and practitioners alike for all-female casts in Shakespearean drama. Could it be that the practice of women playing the male roles in Shakespeare is part of the same social, political and cultural discourses from which the theatre event *Blurred Lines* emerged? Lyn Gardner’s review locates the piece within ‘an increasingly vibrant conversation about achieving genuine equality for our daughters (and sons) ... For too long the F-word has been absent from our stages. For too long we have believed that gender equality has been achieved’ (Gardner, 2014: 34). Do the 2013 examples of all-female productions of Shakespeare belong to that same vibrant, F-word containing conversation that ‘cunningly exposes gender inequality’ in ‘new ... adventurous, ambitious and unexpected’ theatrical ways’?

The theatrical practice of women playing the male roles in Shakespeare is, however, nothing new. Nor latterly is its association with the politics of feminism. In this article, I propose to examine this connection. I will do so by considering two specific examples of the practice: the 2012/13 all-female *Julius Caesar* directed by Phyllida Lloyd, and the 1995/6 *Richard II* directed by Deborah Warner in which Fiona Shaw played the eponymous male character. Moreover, I will locate these two productions, separated by seventeen years and the turn of a

century, within their specific historical, theatrical and theoretical contexts. Through an analysis of the material conditions that gave rise to the contemporary receptions of these two productions, my objective is to draw conclusions regarding the differing ways in which theatre practitioners have created, with audiences, specific theatrical conversations through employing the practice of casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare.

From the above brief description of these two specific productions, a conclusion must already be drawn. In the hands of directors and actresses the theatrical practice of women playing the male roles of Shakespeare has not one but several manifestations. In the Phyllida Lloyd directed *Julius Caesar*, all the parts, both male and female gendered, were played by women, whilst in Deborah Warner's *Richard II*, Fiona Shaw was the only actor whose sex did not correspond with the gender of the role. Conceptual and linguistic definitions and differentiations appear to require identification and classification. However, at present the theoretic study of the practice lacks a shared vocabulary. The gender theorist, Elizabeth Klett, whose extensive taxonomy *Cross-Gender Shakespeare and English National Identity: Wearing the Codpiece* (2009), is an unique study of women playing the male roles in late twentieth, early twenty-first century Shakespeare, acknowledged that there was:

... no common language used to talk about the practice of female-to-male cross-casting. The performances have been variously described as 'androgynous, 'butch', 'cross-cast', 'cross-dressed', 'cross-gendered', 'effeminate', 'gender-bending,' 'in drag,' 'sexless,' 'transgendered,' 'transsexual,' 'transvestite,' and 'unisex,' among others. (Klett, 2009: 3)

Shakespeare and male-gendered roles

As the title of her book suggests, Klett proposed the term 'cross-gender' to classify all the practices of casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare. She proposed the pre-fix 'cross' because for her it implies transgression, and 'cross-gender' which she defined as indicating a multiplicity of meanings:

... a fluid movement across a number of spectrum of gender identities, permitting qualities of masculinity and femininity to be in play simultaneously. (Klett, 2009: 4)

What this definitions does, however, is to lump together a multiplicity of practices and purposes. What appears to be required is a common language that differentiates with precision the multi-faceted practices of casting both men and women in the traditionally female and male gendered roles of Shakespeare.

In the twenty-first century there certainly appears to be an endorsement of all-male casts in Shakespeare. All-male productions of the dramatist's plays have become almost commonplace, the argument for their validity being that it was the practice in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. The reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe has, as part of its remit, a commitment to research early modern theatre practice. This includes seasonal investment in all-male casts. The award-winning company 'Propeller', which began performing in 1997, is exclusively male. Known for its commitment to education and taking all-male 'Pocket' Shakespeare into schools, in 2013 Propeller were performing *Twelfth Night; Taming of the Shrew; A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Comedy of Errors*.¹ In the same year, Shakespeare's Globe transferred its sell-out all-male productions of *Richard III* and a revived *Twelfth Night* to the Apollo Theatre, and thence to the Belasco Theatre on Broadway. The press release issued by Shakespeare's Globe on the announcement of the transfer made specific reference to the casting, where men would be 'playing both male and female roles as the plays were originally staged in Shakespeare's day'.²

Conversely, the all-female casting of Shakespeare's plays has been seen by theatre critics as lacking in justification. Reviewing the 2012/13 *Julius Caesar* directed by Phyllida Lloyd, Charles Spencer wrote:

Before seeing this woman-only Julius Caesar I vowed that I wouldn't resort to Dr Johnson's notorious line in which he compared a woman preaching to a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well but you are surprised to find it done at all. (Spencer, 2012: 33)

The casting of women in male-gendered roles is not, however, a new phenomenon. Indeed, the practice has been popular with audiences since the advent of the actress upon the Restoration stage. Examples of actresses playing male roles are ubiquitous throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century genres of comedy, melodrama, Italian Opera and dance.

¹ <http://www.Propeller.org.uk>

² <http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/theatre/whats-on/globe-theatre-on-tour/shakespeares-globe-on-broadway>

Furthermore, Anne Russell, has argued that it was audiences' familiarity with the popular convention of 'the breeches part' that encouraged women performers to undertake Shakespearean male roles (Russell, 1996: 138). Historically women had been portraying the juvenile parts in Shakespeare: Fleance and the Duke of York in *Richard III*; as well as more ambiguously gendered roles such as the Fool in *King Lear*, Ariel, Oberon and Puck. During the eighteenth century, actresses began to undertake specifically male-gendered roles such as Iago, Richard III, Shylock, Macbeth and Cardinal Wolsey. The two most popular male roles for women during the nineteenth century were, however, Romeo and Hamlet: indeed Sarah Bernhardt, according to Tony Howard, was the most famous Hamlet of her day (Howard 2007). Even so, by the twentieth century the practice of cross-gender casting women in Shakespeare had declined into virtual obsolescence, the cause, Russell argues, being an identifiable late nineteenth century change in theatrical tastes in favour of realism (Russell, 1996: 139).

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a limited re-appearance of the practice of casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare.³ On the fringe, politically avowed feminist companies, such as The Sphinx Theatre Company, began to experiment with all-female and gender-reversed casting. In 1979, at the height of a popular cultural engagement with radical political viewpoints, Frances de la Tour was cast as Hamlet. Fifteen years then passed before Fiona Shaw played the king in Deborah Warner's 1995/6 *Richard II*, a performance that was suddenly and closely followed by six productions that accentuated the use of cross-casting. In 1997, Kathryn Hunter appeared as Lear; in 2000, Vanessa Redgrave played Prospero at the

³ 1979: Frances da la Tour as Hamlet, directed by Robert Walker for the Half Moon Theatre, Mile End Road, London.
1995/6: Fiona Shaw as Richard II, directed by Deborah Warner for the Cottesloe Theatre, National Theatre of Great Britain, London.

1997: Kathryn Hunter as Lear in *King Lear*, directed by Helena Kaut-Howson for the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester and the Young Vic Theatre, London.

2000: Vanessa Redgrave as Prospero in *The Tempest*, directed by Lenka Udovicki for the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London.

2001: Dawn French as Bottom led a group of cross-cast mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Matthew Francis for the Albery Theatre, London.

2003: All-female cast, *Richard III*, directed by Barry Kyle for the 'Season of Regime Change', the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London.

2003: All-female cast, *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by Phyllida Lloyd for the 'Season of Regime Change', the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London.

2004: All-female cast, *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Tamara Harvey for the 'Season of Star-Crossed Lovers', the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, London.

2012: Kirsty Bushell as Sebastian in *The Tempest*, directed by David Farr, part of the 'What Country Friends Is This' trilogy for the RSC at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

2012: Pippa Nixon as The Bastard in *King John*, directed by Maria Aberg, part of the 'Nations at War' season for the RSC at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

2012/13: All-female cast, *Julius Caesar*, directed by Phyllida Lloyd for the Donmar Warehouse Theatre, London.

reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe and in 2001, the West End presented another articulation of the practice: a re-gendered group of mechanicals, featuring Dawn French as Mrs Bottom.

In 2003, Shakespeare's Globe formed the Women's Company, which undertook all-female productions of *Richard III*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. At this point there was a hiatus with regard to the practice, with the exception of the 2007, Neil Bartlett directed *Twelfth Night* at the RSC. The programme for the production declared it to be specifically interested in the performance of 'drag'. Viola was played by a man, Chris New, whilst the comic grouping of Sir Toby Belch, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Fabian was portrayed by women: Majorie Yates; Annabel Leventon; Joanne Howarth respectively. However it was not until 2012 that cross-casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare made a noticeable re-appearance on the major English stages. As well as the Donmar's all-female *Julius Caesar*, in 2012 the RSC re-gendered both Sebastian in *The Tempest*, and The Bastard in *King John*. In June 2013 Shakespeare's Globe produced another all-female *Taming of the Shrew*, almost exactly a decade to the day since the earlier version opened in August 2003: directed, incidentally, by Phyllida Lloyd.

Furthermore, if we look ahead to 2014, the RSC will be touring a gender-reversed 'First Encounters *Taming of the Shrew*'. Intended for children between the ages of eight and fifteen, the production and will be played, with an accompanying workshop, in association with various English schools. For the autumn season 2014, Maxine Peake has been contracted to play Hamlet at the Royal Exchange, Manchester. Like Francis de la Tour, Fiona Shaw and Kathryn Hunter before her, playing the central male role Peake will be the only member of the company to be engaged in what she refers to as 'gender swapping'.⁴ I do not claim that this brief history of the tradition of casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare is comprehensive. Rather, it is a compressed account of how well-established, publicly-funded institutions have chosen to engage with the practice of casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare, a practice that is neither historically uncommon nor does its adaptation exist in isolation. What my short survey has confirmed, however, is that a practice that is often classified under the single heading of cross-gender casting is far from singular. Rather it is complex, multi-faceted, each manifestation requiring differentiation and definition.

⁴ http://www.royalexchange.co.uk/news_detail.aspx?article=500

The selected productions I have listed above indicate the presence of sub-sections within the practice of casting women in the traditionally male roles of Shakespeare, sub-groups which must be differentiated by genre, motivation and theatrical consequence. One comic example I have given is the Abbey Theatre's 2001 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here the director, Matthew Francis, set the play in a bomb-damaged, English stately home, sometime during the Second World War. His theatrical vision included a whole group re-gendering of the 'mechanicals', who appeared as members of the Women's Voluntary Service. The effect desired was a re-interpretation of the erotic comedy within the drama, particularly focused upon the female body of the comic actress, Dawn French. In 2012, the director Maria Aberg re-gendered a single role in the history play *King John* - that of The Bastard. Her motivation was to orientate the production towards a discussion of female political power. Re-gendering is, however, only one of the practices of casting women across gender. All-women casts is a second variable. Examples of comic all-female casts include several productions of *The Taming of the Shrew* and a *Much Ado About Nothing*, whilst in the more tragic mode are the Donmar's *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare's Globe's *Richard III* and in 2013 the Smooth-faced Gents' *Titus Andronicus*. Lastly, several of the productions listed here have chosen to restrict the cross-casting to the central role: Francis de la Tour as Hamlet; Kathryn Hunter as Lear and Fiona Shaw as Richard II. In all the examples I have cited, the director concerned is on record as saying that the actress was chosen because she was considered to be the most suitable performer to play the role. In other words, such decisions are examples of a third variation: so called, 'gender-blind' casting.

'Gender-blind' casting

Gender-blind casting as a theatrical practice may be defined as that which requires the audience to disregard the sex of the actor playing the part, whatever traditionally the gender of the role may be. A key example of the practice of gender-blind casting is the groundbreaking 1995/6 production of *Richard II*, directed by Deborah Warner. This production, which played at the Cottesloe space within the National Theatre, was indelibly shaped by Warner's potent decision to cast her long-term collaborator, Fiona Shaw, in the eponymous role. Despite the actress being both a woman and Irish (two characteristics which provoked a 'vitriolic response' (Monks, 2007: 93) from the critics), Warner told Claire Armistead that she had cast

Shaw because she was "the most exciting and suitable Richard I could think of" (Armistead, 1995: T10).

Superficially, the casting makes apparent sense. Recent theatrical tradition has favoured playing Richard as feminine. However, Warner did not choose the obvious route of using Shaw's female body directly to emphasise Richard's effeminate qualities. Rather the director and her lead actress decided to concentrate upon the idea that intrigues the character himself: his physical duality as primarily the king, 'divinely appointed, anointed and hedged in majesty' (Rutter, 2010: 488) but also as mortal, needy flesh. Furthermore, Warner and Shaw highlighted Richard's acknowledgment of his own duplicity, his function as an actor in the context of monarchy, a form of theatrical performance. Shaw's gender was fundamentally important to the exposition of Warner's production themes. The resultant clash of signifiers – male role, female body – was designed to offer audiences a specific theatrical, exegetic interpretive strategy:

The fact that the one thing you were going to get for free was the discrepancy, the awkwardness, the person unfitted for the role because they were even the wrong gender ... I wanted everybody who came across Richard to have a great big problem when they met this person who must be male through virtue of being a king, yet who looked like women and was effeminate. I was very much looking forward to that being a problem that everybody would have to work with. (Cousin, 1996: 233)

The discrepancy created by the female body in the male role highlighted the question which interested Warner and Shaw, one which they had excavated from the Shakespearean text: what is the human being but the roles s/he has been given to play? Essentially bound up in the role of 'king', which Richard has been cast to play, is 'man' – however problematic that role might prove to be.

In 1995, a woman playing the role of "man" in a Shakespearean play certainly did prove problematic for many within the critical fraternity. The decision to cast the Irish Fiona Shaw as a Shakespearean king, and a king of England too, was considered by some reviewers to come near to scandalous (Monks, 2007: 93). Warner emerged from the uproar with a certain level of 'notoriety' (*The Independent*, 19 July 1995: 10). 'Even before it opened at the National Theatre in June 1995', wrote Carol Rutter, "every major British newspaper had an

opinion about Deborah Warner's *Richard II* (Rutter, 1997: 315). Critics were in high dudgeon at the prospect of a woman playing a Shakespearean, tragic male role. Warner and Shaw were perceived as having demonstrated a deliberate intention to confront and challenge prevailing approaches to Shakespeare's play: 'They don't come more dangerous or daring than this,' noted Carole Woddis (6 June 1995: 24). In May 1995, three weeks before the production even opened, Andrew Temple of the *Independent* called it:

Gimmick casting ... A female Richard II is the sort of thing you might expect to see at the end of term in a boarding school but there is no history of the part being played by a woman professionally. (Temple, 21 May 1995: 23)

Some two weeks after the show had gone up, Paul Taylor felt compelled to offer a 'second opinion' to 'defend' *Richard II* from the baying critics (Taylor, 14 June 1995: 10) one of whom, Jack Tinker, entitled his review 'Fiona's King is a Drag', dismissing her performance as having only mere 'curiosity value' (Tinker, 16 June 1995: 52). Shaw was personally attacked as lacking in femininity, 'a lean angular woman with a sharp jutting jaw [who] is not particularly attractive' (Monks, 2007: 93) whilst at the same time being described as not 'having enough maleness to play Peter Pan' (Koenig, 5 June 1995: 10). The uproarious 'silly season', as Rutter dubbed it, continued:

First night notices found critics – such as Benedict Nightingale in the *Times* – writing as if addled, their imaginations filled 'with panicky images: the Maggie Smith Falstaff, the Nicole Williamson Desdemona, the Raquel Welch Titus Andronicus. (Rutter, 1997: 314)

Virtually alone among the reviews, *The Guardian* judged the production to be:

... intelligent and innovative and not just for the casting of Fiona Shaw ... *Richard II* is often played as a glittering medieval pageant with a fat part for a lyric tenor. Here it becomes a long-range study in social disintegration and, even transcending the inevitable argument over Shaw's Richard, is Warner's complete realisation of the fact that Shakespeare is writing a national tragedy about a land going into freefall decline. (Billington, 5 June 1995: 8)

In retrospect, Warner's *Richard II* has continued to appear radical: firstly, because of its innovative approach to the Shakespearian text realised in the central casting, and secondly, as it appears to usher in a period during which theatre practitioners took a renewed interest in the

practice of casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare. Klett has argued that, given the fifteen-year gap following Frances de la Tour's *Hamlet*, 'it was not until 1995 that Fiona Shaw's *Richard II* revived substantial interest in the practice on mainstream stages in Britain' (Klett, 2009: 28). However Klett chooses to concentrate on the Warner/Shaw *Richard II* as a turning point for her own purposes. She suggests that the production is seminal because this premise is the foundation of her own thesis. Her argument is built in the hypothesis that the final decade of the twentieth century marked the beginning of a period during which the British theatre establishment connected with the politics of gender as social construction.

The re-emergence of the practice of casting women in male gendered roles in the 1980s and 90s has generally led theorists to the conclusion that the revival was initiated by changing social and cultural attitudes brought about by the politics of feminism. James C. Bulman connected the cross-gender casting of both male and female actors with the same cultural movements that gave rise to feminism, queer theory and gender studies:

Only a revolution in our way of viewing gender in Western societies – a revolution born of the women's movement, but soon including the identity politics of the gay movement and a 'queering' of our understanding of gender roles – can account for this interest. (Bulman, 2008: 13)

Furthermore, if Anne Russell is correct and the decline of the practice during the late nineteenth century was due to an identifiable change in public tastes then the resurfacing of the practice could be due to the coupling of changing attitudes to the status of women and a dissatisfaction with realism as the dominant mode of theatrical representation:

By the early twentieth century, tragic cross-dressing was regarded as an eccentric, old-fashioned convention which had faded away in the new, realist, post-Ibsen theatre. (Russell, 1996: 139)

Late twentieth century theatre practitioners were looking for new theatrical ideologies with which to discuss current social and political discourses. Christopher Baume has argued that, by the 1990s, there existed three broad theoretical modes of production located within European and North American theatrical practice. These he summarizes 'under schematic headings in connection with their founders, with the headings referring in each case to the relationship between actor and role' (Balme, 2008: 22): *involvement*, arguably the most influential model to be found in contemporary theatre practice and associated with Konstantin Stalislavski; *self-*

renunciation, defined by the work of Grotowski; *detachment*, connected with the practitioners Brecht and Meyer hold. In the case of the director, playwright and theorist Brecht, his theatrical ideology emerged from his Marxist political purposes. Thus his theatrical discourse was primarily polemic and, since its purpose was instructive, Brecht argued that drama should present a theatrical text from which the audience, and the theatrical practitioner, could remain intellectually detached. One way to achieve this aim was to physicalise artifice, for example, by holding the actor before the spectator as both him or herself and the character being played. One of the effects of cross-gender playing is that the audience experiences a heightened awareness of the meta-theatrical nature of performance. It was inevitable, therefore, that the theatrical and political effect of cross-casting men and women became of particular interest to gender theorists and performance scholars who had been influenced by a wider cultural fascination with gender as a possible social construct rather than an inherent psychological characteristic.

Deconstructing gender performativity

When Fiona Shaw performed *Richard II* her casting was widely seen as locating Warner's 'interpretation within current theatre politics' (Shewring, 1996: 181). Warner was judged to have engaged with the politics of gender through the practice of casting a woman in a traditionally male-gendered Shakespearean role. This is Klett's viewpoint. She argues that by placing the cross-cast female actor's body at the centre of representation, the importance of reading that body as a visible text to be interpreted in performance was emphasised. Her core premise is that, during the late twentieth, early twenty-first centuries, the intention of the theatre practice of casting women in the male roles was to 'de-naturalise' gender. Thus the spectator at a cross-cast performance is purposefully being asked to confront the instability of gender itself and, consequently, to interrogate assumptions about the nature of sexual desire and the 'naturalness' of male and female behaviour. According to Klett's thesis, by deconstructing 'gender performativity', the cross-cast female practitioner chooses to utilise the stage as an experimental locus for subverting the status quo, the object being to draw the spectator's attention to the artificiality of traditional power structures. Therefore, she concludes, the cross-casting of women actors challenges a tradition of male-centred interpretations of the plays of Shakespeare, thereby disrupting the authority that has culturally been attributed to the playwright. The ideological position which Shakespeare

occupies in British culture is consequently threatened and the embedded concept of 'Englishness' (particularly English 'maleness') problematised. This undermining of the perception of English maleness, Klett suggests, is responsible for the reaction of a certain section of the critical fraternity confronted with the cross-gender casting of women in the male Shakespearean roles.

There are many possible meanings produced and challenged by the spectator's gaze at the woman who plays a man in Shakespeare. However valid Klett's argument, it is flawed in that it fails to assimilate some theatre practitioners' persistent rejection of the premise that the politics of feminism were responsible for the casting choices made. This Klett acknowledges. She allows that Warner and Shaw were 'adamant' (Klett, 2009: 32) that their *Richard II* was not about the performance of gender. Indeed Shaw specifically described her performance as '... not a feminist gesture in any way and I think all the more poetic for it' (Klett, 2009: 32). Warner has continued to maintain that Shaw was simply the best actor for the role, male or female. According to Rutter, Warner 'directs actors, not plays, so she casts actors, not gender' (Rutter, 2010: 487). Such statements appear seriously to undermine Klett's hypothesis, along with other scholarship involved in the feminist project. Aoife Monks classified Warner's standpoint as 'resistance' to the 'idea that gender or the canon might be disrupted by such a casting choice' (Monks, 2007: 90), whilst Klett characterised the women's response as 'defensive, designed to deflect the antagonism that the British press aimed at their production' (Klett, 2009: 32). She even calls the theatre practitioners disingenuous, stating, 'actresses' denial of gender differences is possibly defensive and probably inaccurate to the ways in which they do their work' (Klett, 2009: 153). However, discussing Helena Kaut-Howson's 1997 production of *King Lear*, Schafer warns against a 'knee-jerk' assumption that practitioners 'must be making a feminist statement because she was a woman director casting a woman as Lear' (Schafer, 1998: 142). Kaut-Howson has said that:

... both Kathryn Hunter and myself were adamant about it being *nothing* to do with feminism at all. If I hadn't known an actress like Kathryn Hunter and if it hadn't been for a particular personal reason why I wanted to do *King Lear* at that time, I would never have thought of casting a woman in that part. (Schafer, 1998: 141-142)

Like Kaut-Howson, Warner continues to maintain that her choice to employ cross-casting was initiated only by a specific reading of *Richard II*. Her motivation was the wish to see what was released from the text when a particular actor played the role.

Lloyd's *Julius Caesar*

Where feminist criticism has been of particular value is in highlighting the 'clash between the representation of gender in these women's productions and the conservative institutional context in which they work' (Monks, 2007: 90). That the traditional power structures of the institutions of theatre have changed very little since 1995 was dramatically highlighted when a new all-female production of *Julius Caesar* opened at the Donmar Warehouse in late November 2012. It quickly attracted a great deal of curiosity, due in no small part to the celebrity status of its director, Phyllida Lloyd. As had been the case seventeen years earlier, the British press was prompt to ask why Phyllida Lloyd had chosen to cast in such a manner. Unlike Warner and Shaw, however, Lloyd firmly located her decision within the politics of feminism:

Are you not afraid, I ask, that people will think you are doing a feminist-separatist, 1970s-commune-style, muesli-eating production? 'Well,' says Lloyd, with quiet satisfaction. 'That is what we are doing'. (Higgins, 19 November 2012: 16)

In 2012, Lloyd saw to it that the F-word was on the theatrical agenda. Furthermore, what Lloyd gave audiences in her all-female *Julius Caesar* was a sustained critique of traditional power structures. She achieved this through her crucial decision to set a drama concerned with experiences of authority and freedom in a women's prison. This concept afforded Phyllida Lloyd the opportunity to cast fifteen women actors in a play where normally the only female roles are the two wives of the eponymous character and the conspirator, Marcus Brutus. The conceit of the framing device offered the audience a perfectly logical explanation as to why there were no male actors available to this production. It proposed a circumstance in which the incarcerated female inmates, perhaps for educational, recreational or therapeutic motives, were rehearsing the play *Julius Caesar*.

Julius Caesar appeared to have been chosen as a text for the fictional women prisoners because it is concerned with the social consequences of rigid and hierarchical systems. The

prison setting was offered as a mirror-image of the world of Shakespeare's play, both representing closed societies where friendship, honour and power are inextricably enmeshed. Phyllida Lloyd's direction therefore facilitated a fresh reading of the central issues raised by the Shakespearean text. Moreover, audiences at the Donmar were invited to see the performance of the play-within-the-play, as an opportunity for the fictional women prisoners to explore the suggested freedom allowed by theatre. Not only the liberty imaginatively to enjoy release from physical and emotional limitations, but also those of gender. The perceived freedom allowed by theatre was equally true for the actresses portraying the fictional women prisoners, playing the men in Shakespeare's drama. The all-female casting, therefore, created the theatrical vocabulary of the performance.

This vocabulary did not, however, include the utilization of the practice of gender-blind casting. That is, apart from the characters of the wives, and the Soothsayer who was presented as a young girl, Lloyd insisted that her audiences be aware that the women actors were playing female prisoners who were playing men. In interviews the actresses spoke of the liberation they felt being released from having to play characters that exist only in relationship to the male roles (Billington, 5 December 2012: 17). Thus the spectator was aware that an unusual theatrical self-determination was being enjoyed by the professional actresses, who had been granted the agency to drive the plot and to bring a new perspective to traditionally male roles.

Furthermore it was the prison's internal politics that shaped the interpretation of the play-within-a-play. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* became a metaphor for the shifting allegiances of prison life, and the pent-up rage that lack of opportunity and incarceration had engendered in the women. The power struggles of the ancient world were precisely paralleled by the inmates' own girl gang rivalries, which in turn were seen to be governed by fierce factional loyalties. Established prison relationships appeared to parallel those of the play. The Guardian critic, Michael Billington, recognised similarities between Phyllida Lloyd's production and Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*, noting how the audience is 'constantly aware of how the drama is shaped by the institutional setting' (Billington, 5 December 2012: 17). Billington's point was made precisely in the directorial treatment of the prison officer who performed the titular role of Julius Caesar in the prisoners' performance. Played by Frances Barber, this warden was a criminal bully whose violent tendencies had gained her the upper hand on the prison wing. Her portrayal of the character of Julius Caesar was a reproduction

of the warden's swaggering psychology. When the character Caesar was choked to death amidst a sea of confusion in the front row of the audience, the character of the officer simply slipped back into her prison uniform in order to resume charge. Inside the world of the inmates there was no prospect of change.

Ultimately the production ended on a heartbreakingly bleak note. Its final image was of the women prisoners, who, having acted out their frustrations, were lined-up and returned to their cells. After their taste of imaginative freedom, it was given to the female prisoner whom Harriet Walter told me she had named Hannah, or perhaps to the actor herself, to bring up the line. She stormed off in a rage of bitter anguish to be returned to physical and imaginative incarceration. The suggestion was that the actresses are as much prisoners of a closed hierarchical system as the inmates they portrayed. The worlds of the women, defined as they are by limitation, reverted to the status quo.

Lloyd's publically stated aim in the direction and casting of her 2012/3 all-female *Julius Caesar* was that she was trying to redress the gender imbalance she saw as still endemic at every level in the English theatre. She was, she said, intent upon making 'reparation'.⁵ Research conducted in 2011 suggested that there remained roughly a 2:1 ratio of employment across English theatre (Freestone, 2011): that is, for every one woman working, there are two men. Traditional power structures within the theatre still legislate against women and have been slow to change despite four decades of social and political adjustment. That such change has taken place elsewhere is evident in the reception that women playing the male roles in Shakespeare receive. The press, on the whole, showed a unanimously positive interest in Lloyd's *Julius Caesar*, with only the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Express* the *Daily Mail* expressing distaste. Libby Purves began her review: 'Some nights, recovering, the theatregoer feels that something genuinely important has happened: a seismic shift in the possible, a revolution' (Purves, 5 December 2012: 8). Susannah Clapp described the production as 'one of the most important theatrical events of the year' (Clapp, 9 December 2012: 30), whilst Henry Hitchings called it as 'an important production ... visceral and exciting theatre' (Hitchings, 5 December 2012: 29). Though Michael Billington thought the production flawed, he concluded with the opinion that 'these imprisoned women are impelled to present a play that deals with violence, conflict and the urge to overthrow

⁵ Lloyd, interview by Will Gompertz, 6 December, 2012.

any form of imposed authority' (Billington, 5 December 2012: 17). He leaves it, perhaps purposefully, unclear as to whether he is referring to the inmates incarcerated within Lloyd's prison framework or the actresses imprisoned within the power structures of the British Theatre. Phyllida Lloyd's object was to ask to her audiences to consider how both are subject to arbitrary authority.

Women in 21st Century Theatre

The 2012/3 all-female *Julius Caesar* did quickly become a site for discussion regarding the status of women in the theatre. Matt Truman wrote, in November 2012, when the transfer of the Shakespeare's Globe's revived all-male *Twelfth Night* and *Richard III* to the West End was immanent:

All this comes at a time when gender is at the forefront of theatrical politics. In June the actors' union Equity sent letters to 43 artistic directors calling for increased opportunities for women, after finding that 'roles of men significantly outweighed those for women' at the vast majority of theatres surveyed. (Truman, 17 November 2012: 22–23)

In December 2012, Charlotte Higgins wrote an article asking 'Women in theatre: why do so few make it to the top? Higgins interviewed prominent women working in theatre - Janet Suzman; Stella Duffy; Elizabeth Freestone; Josie O'Rourke; Tanika Gupta; Vicky Featherstone and Phyllida Lloyd – many of whom who were struggling 'with a sense of basic injustice' (Higgins 2012: 16), asking them why it is that women are underrepresented at every level of theatre, and what needs to change? The difference between 2012/13 and the late 1990s appears to be that the traditional structures of power have softened enough to allow for a discussion regarding the possibility of change in favour of equality for men and women.

In 2013, as far as the performance of the plays of Shakespeare is concerned, the term gender-blind casting has been offered as the solution to the problem of visible gender disparity. For the Arts presenter, Tom Sutcliffe, reviewing *Julius Caesar* on Radio 4 'the case for gender-blind casting barely needs making ... It seems to me that once you've acknowledged that a

woman can be a general in real life, she can be a general on stage' (Sutcliffe, 8 December 2012). Commonly the argument runs that colour-blind casting has long since ceased to be a matter for comment amongst theatre audiences. Therefore, why not gender-blind casting?

However, academic study of colour-blind casting has concluded that 'blind' practices are highly nuanced. For, as Susan Bennett has demonstrated the theatrical relationship between seeing and believing is complicated and dependent upon the spectator's willingness to suspend disbelief (Bennett, 1997: 167). 'Blindness' in casting is therefore contingent upon a readiness in audiences to regard the character and not the actor. The problem with this hypothesis is that it denies both the personal and historical significance of difference. There are many possible meanings produced and challenged by the spectator's gaze at the woman who plays a man in Shakespeare. Furthermore, I trust I have demonstrated that gender-blind casting is not a 'cover-all' term for the many practices that have developed when women play the male roles in Shakespeare. Gender-blindness was no more part of Lloyd's directorial decision than it was of Aberg's or Warner's. On the contrary, casting women in the male roles of Shakespeare shaped the theatrical vocabulary of their work through an acknowledgment of the spectator's awareness of gender.

At the beginning of this article, I asked whether it is possible that the late twentieth, early twenty-first century theatre practice of casting women in the traditionally male roles of Shakespeare was part of the same social, political and cultural discourses from which the 2013 theatre event *Blurred Lines* had emerged? There is no doubt that the Donmar's all-female *Julius Caesar* is a self-conscious contribution to a conversation that questions why the British theatre has, on the whole, remained wedded to traditional structures of power, despite four decades of change in a world which the theatre affirms to represent. Yet the practice itself has historical precedence, stretching back into theatre history to the advent of women upon the stage. We should therefore be wary of assuming a connection between the practice and politics of feminism in all cases. Rather the casting of women in the male roles of Shakespeare is an interesting strategy in that it appropriates audiences' awareness of difference in order to serve the practitioners' intentions. Every variable of the theatre practice has a unique affect upon the presentation of the specific play-script, which suggests that further, interdisciplinary academic analysis is necessary in order fully to engage with the contemporary practices of cross-casting. Only then may we understand why the theatre continues to cast women in the male roles of Shakespeare.

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