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She's Not Allowed to Do That: Two Actors Embody Female Same-Sex Sexuality

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Research Question:
When actors embody female same-sex attraction, how do they experience the similarities and differences between their character's sexuality and their own?

Introduction:
• Summer 2018. An emerging theatre company in Waterloo, Iowa produces a play — Stop Kiss by Diana Son.
• The two lead characters are women (Callie and Sara); they fall for each other romantically, and the story revolves around their first kiss.
• Pseudonyms for the two lead actors: Rose plays Callie, and Caroline plays Sara.
• An opportunity: To make a play and explore Rose and Caroline's experiences embodying same-sex sexuality.

Literature Review:
• Judith Butler on gender and performance: “Gender is a repeated stylization of the body” and a “practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint.”
• Jill Dolan’s theory of feminist criticism: the potential to “denaturalize dominant codes.”
• Jerzy Grotowski and the possibility of theatrical encounter: “making the life-mask fall away,” revealing a more intimate self.

Methodology:
Performance as Research: A field of study about making new knowledge that can only come through doing theatre. This knowledge then lives — first and foremost — in the bodies of the practitioners.

Primary tools: Interviews with the two main performers and observations recorded in the director’s rehearsal journal.

Results:
Had the actor been attracted to women in her own life?
Both said no.

What challenges did each actor experience in embodying non-straight sexuality?
Caroline experienced visibility and acceptance; she saw gay couples on television and her mother explicitly told her that it would be alright if she were gay.
Rose had silence around the subject in her home life, and recounted a uniform heterosexuality in the media of her childhood.

What challenges did each actor experience in embodying non-straight sexuality? Rose was personally challenged by kissing a woman onstage, feeling that it somehow made her less womanly. Caroline said that the hardest thing she had to do in the play was figure out why her character fell in love with the other.

Other experiences from the embodiment process in rehearsal:
The culminating kiss built slowly over several weeks of rehearsal — starting with a simple touching of foreheads, adding in a kiss on the cheek, and eventually becoming a kiss on the lips as the actors grew more comfortable.
Caroline used personalization to bring meaningful connection to her scenes with the other actor. She would recall what finding a man attractive felt like, and then use that recalled experience. Personalization lead Caroline to take more initiative in the kiss, because that is what she as a person would do in a similar situation.

How were the actors affected personally?
Rose: “If I want to paraphrase it completely colloquially and informally and not eloquently, I feel like it did make me a little gayer. And I wonder if it’s because I just never thought about it before? Which would imply that I’m pretty straight, but then I wonder. I mean, I know I’m pretty straight. But then I just wonder: what kind of environment did I grow up in that made me not even think about it? I made out with chicks in college, like that kind of thing. Women don’t scare me. I find their forms attractive, but I’m not necessarily attracted to them. I’m not attracted to them, let’s put it that way. But it’s a fine line. I don’t know, and I’ve just never explored it. I think because I live in a world where it’s not expected to.”

Caroline’s main impact was “wanting to think more about how her straight privilege affects her interactions.” Caroline volunteered with her company at a local pride event and wanted to find more ways to support the queer community.

Both Rose and Caroline were hit by the realities of queerness in a personal way as a result of their character.

Rose: “I didn’t realize how terrifying it would be – if I were to have to come out – how much of a fucking struggle.” Rose said. “And how you would have to want it really fucking bad and be really fucking sure in order to endure that kind of trauma.”

Significance:
Three levels of meaning
Personal
• Academic
Personal: Both actors created knowledge that now lives in their bodies.
Rose questioned the origins and absolute nature of her sexual identity. Caroline’s understanding of her heterosexual privilege expanded.

Theoretical: These actors challenged norms of gender performance, and this challenging has the potential to change gender-coded structures of power.
When Rose began to own an action in rehearsal that she felt was masculine – initiating a kiss – her personal experience of femininity expanded. In performance, Rose then embodied this expanded femininity in front of an audience.

Academic: Questions for further research.
• What do people in audiences experience when watching actors embody female same-sex sexuality, and do they think differently about gender after?
• Is there a way in which the amount and style of an actor’s training impacts how intimately that actor is affected by embodying a character? (Caroline had more actor training than Rose.)
• What are the ways performance can be intentionally used by artists to challenge dominant ideologies of what it means to be a woman?

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