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She's not allowed to do that: performing stigmatized same-sex sexuality

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SHE'S NOT ALLOWED TO DO THAT:
PERFORMING STIGMATIZED SAME-SEX SEXUALITY

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In the summer of 2018, an emerging theatre company produced *Stop Kiss* by Diana Son in Waterloo, Iowa, a mid-size industrial town adjacent to the city of Cedar Falls, which hosts a small public university. In *Stop Kiss*, the two lead characters are women fall romantically for each other, so that in performing their characters the actors embody same-sex sexuality. This paper will explore how the actors playing these two characters engaged with this embodiment, and how doing so affected them.

Judith Butler, prominent gender theorist, posits a strong connection between gender and performance: that gender is created through the performance of practices, and these performances shape internal identity. To use Butler's words from *Gender Trouble*, an action is performative in the sense that it is "constituting the identity it is purported to be" (33). The degree to which these actions influence a person's sense of self is something of a mystery to Butler, but she strongly believes in the existence of some performative influence on the "internal coherence of the subject" (23). The sorts of performative practices to which Butler refers often affect a person's sense of their own gender and identity without that person being aware that they are engaging in a self-formative practice.

For feminist activists and scholars, awareness of these actions existing at all can be a starting point for critiquing them. As writer and scholar Jill Dolan expresses in her introduction to *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, "Feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse. It is a critique of prevailing social conditions that formulate women's position as outside of dominant male discourse" (3). Dolan declares that theatre artists with this feminist awareness are uniquely positioned to engage

in critique by “denaturalizing dominant codes” in performance. She gives the example of theatrical work that puts lesbians at the center, and therefore demonstrates a world outside of the hegemonic heterosexual one (116). The actor embodying lesbianism, a sexual identity unsanctioned by the dominant system of power, directly challenges the norms that regulatory practices attempt to uphold. She is engaged in an act that has the potential to “challenge gender-coded structures of power” as she encounters a way of being that falls outside of hegemonic norms (68).

These ideas of embodiment and encounter surface in a different way in the work of Polish actor and producer Jerzy Grotowski. At his theatre laboratory, Grotowski worked with actors to pursue what he called Poor Theatre, a theatre made of only its essentials, with unnecessary elements removed. “The core of the theatre is an encounter,” Grotowski wrote in *Towards a Poor Theatre*. What type of encounter does he mean here? The encounter that Grotowski describes is an act of inclusive, radical embodiment. For an actor, it is “not merely a confrontation with his thoughts, but one involving his whole being from his instincts and his unconscious right up to his most lucid state” (57). This can be so intimate as to cause the “life-mask to fall away,” revealing a person deeper than one created by daily performative practices (23). In this way, encounter can create new knowledge, making a thing in that moment that has never existed before.

In a given play, where is the opportunity for artistic encounter that could create new knowledge? Producing this summer gave an opportunity by requiring actors to embody and encounter stigmatized sexualities, and then giving rise to multiplicity of questions about that experience. This way of discovering a research opportunity follows a key principle of a field

known as Practice as Research: That one starts less with a traditional research question and more with a general “enthusiasm of practice” and a want to pursue something exciting or unruly (Hasman 56). How does one move forward into research from this “enthusiasm of practice”, into creating art that is simultaneously both intellectual inquiry and a source of unique knowledge? (Riley and Hunter xvi). Where is the knowledge in art to be found? Ian Watson at Rutgers University asserts that the knowledge produced by a theatrical event lives in the performers’ bodies and is, therefore, *embodied* knowledge: The act of the performance creates and contains knowledge that exists in the art alone and cannot be replicated in another form (Watson 87).

This research endeavored to explore actor embodiment through the theatrical event of a fully staged production of *Stop Kiss* by Diana Son. Son’s script involves situations that violate typical regulatory performances of gender: Son places her two central female characters, Callie and Sara, together in a burgeoning romantic relationship and builds the story around their first kiss. With this being the case, a production of *Stop Kiss* allowed for exploration of how actors embody the stigmatized sexuality of female same-sex attraction, and specifically how they experience the similarities and differences between their character’s sexuality and their own.

While the best knowledge of what the actors experienced in embodying their characters was the show itself, interviews were also conducted with the two lead performers (Rose, who played Callie, and Caroline, who played Sara) in order to explore their understanding and expression of their experiences. The interviews occurred individually with each actor, and over two sessions: the first in the days immediately following the closing of the show, and a follow-up interview a month later. During the rehearsal and performance process, I also kept a journal recording my observations and impressions as the director.

To understand Rose and Caroline's experiences embodying Callie and Sara, the first goal was to learn something about where they were coming from in terms of same-sex sexuality: What had they experienced personally, and what had they been exposed to? In the first full week of rehearsals, I asked both Rose and Caroline if they had been attracted to women before. Caroline's response was that she had never been attracted to a woman; Rose's reply was the same (Risk 3 July). Later, in the interviews, the actors were asked to informally rate themselves on the Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale (commonly referred to as the Kinsey Scale), with 1 indicating exclusively heterosexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and 6 meaning exclusively homosexual. In the process of answering, each interviewee mentioned the complex nature of attraction making it hard to pin down on a simple scale before settling on a number for herself. Rose gave herself a 1.75 in the first interview, and a 1 in the second (13 Aug. 2, 11 Sept. 2). Caroline went with "1-ish" as her rating (16 Aug. 1).

Caroline and Rose received different messaging in their childhoods regarding the relevance and correctness of homosexuality. Caroline recalled there being gay people on TV and it not being a big deal, while Rose recounted a complete absence of non-heterosexuality in the media of her childhood (16 Aug 11, 13 Aug. 6). Rose's Catholic schooling gave her slight exposure to non-straight identities, but that was "one gay dude who got bullied," girls notorious for "hooking up with each other" for male attention, and the message that "men should not have sex with each other" (13 Aug. 6). There was silence around the subject in her home life (13 Aug. 16). In contrast, Caroline recounts a time when her mother asked her if she was gay, only to reassure her that it would not be a problem if she were (16 Aug. 11).

When I asked Rose how she was doing with entering the reality of a woman who was attracted to another woman, she reported an insecurity with regards to “being the man.” This was related to her character being the one that initiated the culminating kiss, and also because Rose was taller than the woman opposite her. Rose said she’s “Always felt manly (because) I’ve always been too large and I’ve always been too long. And that just doesn’t fit in with the general populace. So it feels like other and therefore bad” (Rose 11 Sept. 5). Caroline mentioned that she didn’t think anything of the height difference, since she was used to kissing people taller than herself (Risk 7 July). When asked what the hardest thing she had to do in this play was, Caroline responded, “Maybe figuring out why I fall in love with Callie. I just have never experienced that with a woman. So... it’s the same thing with a guy. But also, it’s not” (5 Sept. 6). Embodying a person who fell for a woman challenged Caroline as an actor, but because it fell outside of things she had experienced in her life.

How did the actors experience the process of embodiment in rehearsal? In our first read of the scene, I talked with the actors about the importance of mutual comfort, and established that we would start the culminating kiss scene with no kiss at all and let the moment grow as the actors felt character needs taking them into more physical connection (Risk 17 July). I encouraged Rose to run the kiss scene and enter into the moment however she could: to tease, poke, or hug Caroline, and start building the connection (17 July). The actors did the actual kiss for the first time halfway into the rehearsal process. Rose reported being nervous, for “being the man” reasons, but also because the kiss felt like it would be coming in the scene without a clear preceding moment of connection. Caroline “said she had her little crush on Callie and felt ready, but that she didn’t want to rush Rose” (21 July). I did end up having them run the scene multiple

times, and it grew from a simple touching of foreheads to a lips-to-lip kiss. After the first time they kissed, Rose took her face away from Caroline and looked out at me, the director, right after the kiss, effectively exiting the moment (21 July). At rehearsal a week later, the kiss involved Rose putting her hands on Caroline's face. Both of them stayed connected to the other person and did not rush out of the moment they were sharing (27 July).

In order to grow her connection to Callie, Caroline used personalization and took memories from her past relationships with men, according to what she shared in an interview (16 Aug. 5). Prior to a scene, she would recall what finding a man attractive felt like, focus on breathing that feeling through her body, and then enter the scene (16 Aug. 6). Personalization led Caroline to take more initiative as rehearsals of the kiss progressed, because she realized that is how she would respond in a similar situation (16 Aug. 3). Rose recounted being surprised by the growing initiative from Caroline, because she was bringing herself to the kiss, and the kisses in Rose's history as an actor have been unemotional and lacking connection. "It's been beaten into of me. Not to have emotional kissing scenes. Because the majority of people that I'm with seem terrified to have that happen. So I need to give you this person, as opposed to the actual hundred thousand percent person that I could give you if I didn't think you were scared in this moment. And she took that down. And I think it surprised me every time" (13 Aug. 7).

Another thing that surprised Rose was the degree to which she, as a person, was impacted by embodying Callie and her experience of falling for a woman. Embodying a queer person caused her to question the origin and absoluteness of her own straightness.

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 like 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. (Rose 13 Aug 1)

She said later on in the interview that maybe if she had been exposed to female same-sex sexuality earlier in life things might have been different, but because she received silence and condemnation around the idea and did experience attraction to men, she never considered it anything close to a valid possibility (13 Aug 2).

Caroline was asked in a follow-up interview for her thoughts on the phrase “*Stop Kiss* made me gay.” She said that she hadn’t thought about that before, but that since she still hadn’t developed feelings for someone who wasn’t a man she would say the show did not make her “gayer” (5 Sept. 7). The main impact she shared was wanting to think more about how her straight privilege affects her interactions. Caroline volunteered at a local pride event, and wanted to find other ways to support the queer community (16 Aug 14).

Engaging with the significance of this work requires considering three levels: the individual, the theoretical, and the systemic. Firstly, the actors came from their own backgrounds, faced barriers, grew into the embodiment, and were individually impacted. On a theoretical level, they challenged norms of gender performance in a specific place and time by choosing as straight-identifying women to embody the stigmatized action of women falling for

each other romantically. Doing this thing women are not supposed to do, and in public performance, has the potential to change gender-coded structures of power.

Rose's experience with femininity and assertiveness gives an example of this. She felt her femininity challenged by the presumed masculinity of being a taller person making "the first move" in a romantic moment, and especially toward another woman. When she continued through the rehearsal process and began to own that moment, her personal experience of femininity expanded. Then she embodied this expanded femininity in front of an audience, subtly changing what Dolan calls "gender-coded structures of power" (68). This is the larger, systemic level on which this work operates: The individual experiences of embodiment engage with the performance of gender and identity, which then can challenge larger systems of power.

This work suggests questions for further research, such as how actor embodiment of female same-sex sexuality affects what audiences think about gender. One actor in this study, Rose, had an intense personal reaction to the embodiment in which she started to question the formation and functioning of her own sexual identity. The other, Caroline, was inspired to be a better ally to the LGBT community, an impact that may be less intensely personal, in that it involves action and not identity. The two actors also had different training backgrounds. Caroline had an undergraduate degree in theatre performance, while Rose had less formal acting training. What impact does the amount and style of actor training have on how intimately an actor is affected by embodying a character? Or is an actor inclined to more personally embody an experience nascent or present in their own life?

To hark back to a question Butler asked, how much do performative practices make identity? And as Dolan wondered, how might performance be intentionally used by artists to

challenge dominant ideologies of what it means to be a woman? If this performance is then done by actors who drive toward Growtoski's concept of encounter, an actor has the opportunity to establish deep contact with herself (57). In *Stop Kiss*, Rose and Caroline went through a process of encounter to embody something women are not culturally allowed to do: fall romantically for another woman. They broke the rules. What did that mean for them? Performance creates identity; identity creates performance. Their thoughts in the interviews give those who did not do the embodiment a slice of understanding, even though the performance itself is the moment of deepest answer to that question. And then there is Rose, having thoughts she didn't think she would have. "Now I just live in this world where I can embody a female that sees another female as "Wow," she said. "But I don't feel — I don't know. I don't know" (13 Aug. 2). Encounter. Embodiment. The words don't really capture it.

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