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PERFORMATIVE GENDER: LONDON

Engaged Learning Final Project
By
Ryan-Patrick McLaughlin

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PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

Funded by Southern Methodist University's Engaged Learning program, mentored by Dr. Gretchen Smith, and informed by an eight week stay in London, *Performative Gender: London* is a solo performance that explores the ways Londoners think about, experience, and express (or perform) gender.

I would like to extend a special thank you to Dr. Gretchen Smith for her mentorship, insight, and commitment to this project. I would like to thank Susan Kress and Meleah Harris for their unbridled support and guidance. Finally, thank you to Engaged Learning, Meadows School of the Arts, SMU Division of Theatre, SMU Student Theatre, Marsha Graselli, Stephanie Machado, Kristen Lee, and Jenna Richanne.

A reading of *Performative Gender: London* was performed in the Meadows School of the Arts Basement Studio B150 on April 13th. A video recording of that performance and talk back session can be found [here](http://bit.ly/1D4pb4s). (<http://bit.ly/1D4pb4s>)

TIME

The time of the performance.

PLACE

The place of the performance.

PRODUCTION NOTES

All characters are to be played by one actor. Each character should be distinguishable by their distinct voice and physicality. There should be no costume changes throughout the performance. Not even simple costume pieces, such as a hat or glasses, should be used to distinguish characters. The use of lighting to distinguish characters may be appropriate.

With regards to lighting, while the NARRATOR speaks, the performance/audience space should resemble an average room as much as possible. "Character light" should take us into a more traditional theatrical lighting convention that separates the audience from the performer.

All characters have an English dialect with the possible exception of the NARRATOR

Audience seats are set in a large circle throughout the performance space. One chair is left reserved. ACTOR enters through the audience and sits in the reserved chair. Takes out a notebook and reads. ACTOR should use his own voice for all NARRATOR lines.

NARRATOR

Gender: Noun: the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. Noun: The state of being male or female. Noun: A subclass within a grammatical class (as noun, pronoun, adjective, or verb) of a language that is partly arbitrary but also partly based on distinguishable characteristics (as shape, social rank, manner of existence, or sex) and that determines agreement with and selection of other words or grammatical forms. Noun: membership of a word or a grammatical form in such a subclass. Noun: An inflectional form showing membership in such a subclass. Noun: Sex. Noun: The behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex. Origins, from Middle English *gendre*, from Anglo-French *genre*, *gendre*, from Latin *gener-*, *genus* birth, race, kind, gender. First Known Use: 14th century.

ACTOR looks out to the audience. Satisfied.

Are you familiar with the idea that the universe contains infinite parallels because it folds in on itself? Very smart people, I believe they're called physicists, believe that every possible combination of circumstances is happening simultaneously in an infinite number of universes. Right now, somewhere in a parallel universe, we are all our exact opposite. And even beyond opposites we are amalgamations of weird mutated evolutionary choices that would bear little or no resemblance to what we know of as life.

Knowing this gives me a great sense of freedom. It's easy for me to feel, and I think many of us to feel, like there aren't many options. Like there is a certain way to go about things and that's true, sometimes. But only true if we agree to the terms.

This both happened and didn't. It's a product of many experiences over many months: Interviews, readings, pictures, flâneur walks, and life. Many of these characters are fabricated. Many of them are real. Some lines are direct quotes some lines are products of the voices in my head.

In the end, this is a group I wish I could have seen made. Been a part of. A group of real dialogue: Unmuted. Liberated. Open. Cracked. Free. At least I hope. I hope that's what it is.

Character light comes up. ACTOR assumes a middle class British accent. Voice and physicality should be distinct for each character.

ACT UP, ACT OUT, FIGHT STUPID

When I was 12 years old I sat in the living room as I watched my mother pack up her bags and move out of my life for the next twenty years. I was twelve so I had spent most of my days with this woman. I remember wanting to get off the couch and stop her. I should have stopped her but when they were fighting, my parents, I got scared and angry and wet myself. Twelve years old and I bloody wet myself.

The thing I regret most in the world is that I didn't get off of that couch and ask her to stay. Demand that she stay. Maybe she would have. She would have. She would have stayed and I would have had twenty more years with her. Twenty more years with her stroking my hair, teaching me lessons, and laughing at my bad jokes. I would have had the years of her teaching me how to become a woman in this bloody world, and the nights of tears because of boys who broke my heart or friends who turned their back would have been easier with her at my side. But I didn't. I didn't get off of that couch and I didn't ask her to stay and I regret that. I think about that. It haunts me. Sits on my shoulder like my own personal demon.

And I can pinpoint it. That is the moment that defined the rest of my life. I speak out because when people don't bad shit happens. I raise my voice because others won't. So call me a dyke. Call me a radical. Call me obnoxious. But I know what I do has value. On average two women a week are killed by a violent partner or ex-partner. 3 million women experience rape, domestic violence or stalking every year. 70% of people in minimum wage jobs are women. So it's definitely not fixed. It's definitely not all better. We definitely have places to grow! Sure it's scary and yes it makes me angry, but I can't just piss myself and hope for the best while praying the worst doesn't happen.

THE ROYAL FAMILY switches between a posh and blue-collar dialect depending on how 'fabulous' she/he is feeling in the moment.

THE ROYAL FAMILY

Gender? Are you asking me because I'm a drag queen? Baby, be who you are is all I have to say about that. Maybe I look like a woman right now but maybe I'm still a man. Maybe I look like a man tomorrow but maybe I'm a woman. It's all like the ocean. It goes out. It comes in. It's always changing. It's always different. You can't define it.

I'm a construction worker you know. Most people don't think it because I'm so fabulous, and my nails are always so well done. I love working with my hands all day. Lifting big strong and heavy things. Working and sweating. Like a man. A man's man. And then at night I beat my face, throw on a dress and some heels, and I am as fantastic as I want to be. It's really an exercise in all parts of myself. I recommend it for everyone. Grunts and groans during the day and a light hearted air at night.

Work can be difficult though. The guys on the jobs don't know what I do with my own time and for the most part they're all right but sometimes they . . . well they say things that hurt me. They don't know. Things that stick deep. I could talk to them. I could bring up all the stuff about what I do at night and how it makes me feel like full human being and how they don't know what they're missing because the workout your legs get in a pair of 5 inch stiletto heels will beat just about anything else you could do and frankly what woman do you know that doesn't wanna man with a tight ass. But at the end of the day I don't. It's not worth it to me. I have to work with these men and it's too hard and would take too long.

One day we're working in a flat in Soho 'round old Compton Street, and a mad rush was put on the job so we were all working late. Soho is one of the gay neighborhoods in London, and if you throw a stone on Compton Street you'll hit a gay bar or restaurant. I was a bit tight up about the whole thing. And the guys just got started from the top of the day about poofs. Poofs this and poofs that. "It's not the sex." They said, "Shag whoever you want, I can't blame a man for stuffing." but "why do they have to saunter around like women." Bloody hell. *Saunter* around like women.

It hurts. These are my friends. I'm not actually gay. I know, another shock. But still these are my friends they're talking about and frankly if their problem if the sauntering I think my nylons, lipstick, and bouffant wig qualify me for their nastiness. I did get a bit of my revenge. Later that day a queen caught Eddy's eye and turned right around. The other guys took the piss out of him for hours .

TUNNEL

How is my gender embraced in London?

Laughs

Well I don't know about that really. My first thought is that it isn't but let me think.

Well have you been to The Tunnel. It's this public graffiti tunnel over near Jubilee Park and I walk through all the time when I'm headed to the Southbank. On the sign to the Tunnel it has all the rules about what can be tagged and what can't. The first rule is No Sexism. When I see that I smile a little bit because it means that in some ways we're thinking about the fact that sexism exists and that we shouldn't be allowing it. You should go the graffiti is killer!

ACROSS THE POND

Coming from having grown up in the States I noticed so many differences. I think the biggest one for me is that here I'm sexy. I mean I walk into a bar in London and men look at me and approach me and buy me drinks even though I'm a big girl. That would have never happened back home. That did a lot for my confidence when I got here. I really felt like I could go out and triumph because of it. Oh that sounds so silly but its true.

Sometimes I'm scared that I've become the woman I looked down on in the states. You know the girl I'm talking about: the one who know what to wear, and how to look at a guy to get him to walk across the bar to you. They know what to say and when to laugh, even when they don't give two shits. I always thought that girl was shallow and sort of pathetic. I don't know that I want to become her.

She thinks on it.

But I think instead of becoming her, really I've just come to understand her a little better.

BOOTSTRAPS

I don't know really what to say about it because I know it's something that's a challenge. Like I know that women are not treated, always, the same as men are but I don't, ummm, really know why that is. I try to always be respectful to women but you know I can't control everybody so what do I do?

But really I mean that. What do I do? If I wanna help what do I do? What do I to help? How do I do the thing?

I honestly couldn't tell you one thing that really needs to change that I can make happen. Sure there are major things like government and policy but I've only got one vote and that's not going to make the difference. Am I supposed to drop everything and start a movement?

We don't get to choose how we're born. Some are born into rich families some aren't and some are born men and some aren't. Am I supposed to live my life ashamed of myself for something I had no control over? I don't think so.

My mother spent her whole life working harder than my father ever even dreamed of. She was an engineer, one of the first in her field and I never heard her talk about gender. She just worked harder and smarter than anyone else, any man that she was around.

If women want things to change *that's* the way they have to do it. It's not my fight. It's not my fight. Work harder and prove the stupid's wrong. My mother always said, "show them don't tell them."

FLIP THE SCRIPT

Who the fuck knows. It's one of those highfalutin liberal terms that don't actually mean anything really but are just a chance for us to categorize ourselves even further.

I'm guessing that you think you're real smart because you're going to challenge our ideas about what gender is. How we define it and all that right? But here's what I think. Toss it out. Throw it to the curb. Why do we care? What's the endgame? What's the goal? So you get what you want and people have a whole new idea about what gender is and what it means and let's say that they even embrace the difference with joy, cheer, and aplomb. At

some point it's going to change again right? Because these things aren't simple they don't box up. Then you start it all again. It's a never-ending cycle.

Why aren't you talking about how the whole thing needs to be tossed out. Why do I care what your gender is. I've got one question for a person. You an asshole? Yes? Then bugger off. No? Great we can be mates. Simple as that. Simple as that.

BY THE NUMBERS

How have you not had a woman president? I mean really it boggles the mind to think that you have yet to have a woman president. A black man before a woman. I mean don't get me wrong, I don't think that the women should have beat the blacks but I'm just saying half the population compared to what? How much of the population is black?

Don't you ever think about that.

THE WALKER

You know it seems to me that lot's of what we talk about goes by the wayside when we talk about gender. Just walk down the street and you'll see what it's like. You see these posters and billboards of women that aren't anything like real women. Or if they are they are still so dolled up or spend so much time thinking about what they look like that it in no way reflects reality. And this isn't fair to anybody. It isn't fair to the women who feel they have to look like this advertisement, and it isn't fair to the men who, like women, now think that poster is what women are supposed to look like.

We create a whole world of guilt, shame, and despair about our bodies because the make-up company or the designer outlet wants to sell us the hope of 'perfection'. We do it willingly. Even those of us who know better. Hell, we should all know better.

THE BUSINESS

Blinkered. They're mostly blinkered on the subject. I go to work in a suite because that's what you do. And we all get off at Canary Wharf, strut into our offices, and sit at our desks in our uniforms. And then we go home. Reverse the order. But I've always laughed at the idea of someone coming in the flip? Sort of ass about face dress code. I come into work in a skirt?

Laughs at the idea.

It's different outside of business though. The rest of London, I'm sure you know isn't nearly as expectant about your dress code. A bit, I'd imagine like New York is. Who cares? We've all got our places to be. It's pretty progressive if you ask me. No one cares about your interests or your proclivities. Just don't bother us.

Business is always last to change. It's always the last to come around to the times. It's best not to rock the boat when you're responsible for the money of other people. Nevertheless who doesn't want to wear a tailored suite and hard-soled shoes? That's a power outfit if ever I've worn one.

THE OTHER HALF

I go to work in a skirt because that's what you do. Our skirts. Then we go home. It's a bit different for women. It doesn't so much matter if I arrive to the office in trousers, that wouldn't turn heads. It wouldn't turn heads so much if I showed without make-up or without jewelry. But if I didn't show as a woman it would turn heads. It's subtler. I'm not saying that I feel the need to have on a dress and bring in fresh baked cookies all week, though if I did I'd be very popular, but there is something. An energy maybe? I don't know what it is exactly.

Truly, in some ways though it's probably easier for us women. Like I said, I can pop into the office in a suite or in trousers or a blouse and it's not a problem. Can you imagine what would happen if one of the men showed up in a skirt or a dress or with lipstick on? He'd be laughed right out of the building I bet.

Suddenly serious

It's different if you're going through a transition of some sort. We've had a couple of people who have done that and it's been, I think, mostly all right for them. I've not noticed anything out of the ordinary with all that sort of thing. But let's say you're just a regular chap and you want to strap on some pumps and a skirt.

Laughs heartily

That's hilarious. Of course if it were really something that the men wanted to do I'm sure they'd make it happen.

ACT UP, ACT OUT, FIGHT STUPID

Gender is a social construct that is typically, and unnecessarily described in a binary: man or woman. It is distinct from sex: male or female.

THE ROYAL FAMILY

Gender is what you make of it.

TUNNEL

I don't know.

ACROSS THE POND

Gender exists on a spectrum from masculine to feminine. Typically male to female.

BOOTSTRAPS

Whether you're a guy or girl.

FLIP THE SCRIPT

Gender is a construct that isn't useful and that oppresses us.

BY THE NUMBERS

Gender is . . . gender is man and woman and nonconforming too, I guess.

THE BUSINESS

Male or female right?

THE OTHER HALF

Gender is how you identify. Man or woman.

NARRATOR:

Narrator light up. Each question is asked with the possibility that the audience might actually answer.

What is a man? What is a woman? What is gender? What is sex? If there were one thing about your gender that you could change, what would it be? What do you do that most exemplifies or demonstrates your gender identity? How does Dallas embrace you? How does Dallas reject you?

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END