

The Measure of a Woman:
Producing Classical Theatre in a Post-#MeToo World

On October 5, 2017, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's *New York Times* exposé on Harvey Weinstein caused an international implosion: inspired by the 2006 phrase coined by Tarana Burke¹, the article launched the #MeToo movement in places as diverse as Ireland, Poland, and South Africa; the ensuing discussion on sexual abuse and power dynamic left no community untouched, including that of the American theatre. The continual fight towards betterment begs a myriad of questions for the community, not the least of which being: in an artistic world that has thrived on hegemonic patriarchal works of the past, how can we address rape culture, abuse of power, and misogynistic trauma onstage? How can we produce classical works in a post-#MeToo era?

Representations of trauma inherent to misogynistic society are pervasive in classical theatre. It is in the strangulation of Shakespeare's Desdemona, the coercion of Williams's Blanche, the assault of Moliere's Elmire. Female trauma is found less obviously, as well, in the weaponization of Lady Macbeth's miscarriage, the deadly objectification of Chekhov's Yelena, and the vilifying of fellow females in *The Maids*. This repetition of the female villain-victim narrative is harmful to both actor and audience. "Beloved female characters have, through my body, been verbally, mentally, and sexually abused; mutilated, murdered, and exiled," writes classical actor Melisa Pereyra. "I am doubly traumatized by both embodying and seeing violence inflicted...for the sake of storytelling."² A 2020 study done for *Performance Science* found that many actors, especially female-identifying actors, reported PTSD-like symptoms connected to their work, as simulated violence "is so connected to reality that it cannot be easily assigned as 'not real.'"³

For the audience, viewing this misogyny can have equally negative impact. Studies going back to the 1980s⁴ prove as much: there are problems of desensitization to sexism and domestic violence, the triggering and normalizing of latent aggressive behavior, and an increase in women internalizing and accepting a victim status. In addition, for those who have past trauma, seeing violence of any variety onstage may trigger the intrusive memories of PTSD, lending itself to self-harm in ways physical and physiological.⁵

However, we cannot and should not entirely rid ourselves of classical theatre. It is our ancestry, rife with artistic brilliance and historical significance. There are two approaches with which to begin the bettering of their production: the expansion of representative canon and the introduction of trauma-informed practice.

Historically, classical theatre has been defined through the male gaze. Excluded from the stage, but not necessarily the audience, classical women were seen through "the exotic—often fetishistic—gaze of the male," begging the question: how can we "disrupt the male subject's phantasy of a phallogocentric power?"⁶ In other words, how does one disrupt the pervasive idea of male as powerful, female as powerless?

One way to do this is through script selection. Though many female artists have been lost to history, there remain numerous female-identifying contemporaries of classical playwrights whose work has survived. Instead of Euripides, consider producing *Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim*. Instead of Shakespeare, consider Susanna Centlivre or Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Instead of Chekhov, consider Amelia P. Rosselli or George Sand. Instead of Williams, consider Angelina Grimké or Zora Neale Hurston. Accessibility is no longer an excuse: these plays have become far easier to license. With the introduction of programs such as Hedgepig Ensemble Theatre's "Expand the Canon"⁷ or UCLA's "Diversifying the Classics,"⁸ hunting down translations and production scripts of these women's plays has become less of a hunt, more of an adventure. A brief click of a URL leads one to a goldmine of artistic genius. Producing these playwrights for a 21st century audience provides women of all backgrounds with representation and empowerment traditionally hidden in classical theatre; on the flip side, it provides male-identifying audience members with portraits of complex women, undeniable heroes of their own story, certainly not victims.

Representative expansion is only the first step, however. Theatres must begin utilizing trauma-informed practices, largely with the assistance of intimacy education and direction. These directors are individuals who specialize in consent work, boundary setting, and establishing a common vocabulary, trained in trauma-informed pedagogy, cultural competence, abuse prevention, and more.⁹ By acting as a bridge between actor and creatives, intimacy directors grant empowerment to a historically disempowered situation, assisting in interpretation to bring forth a sense of safety in the midst of realism. To do this, these specialists utilize “deloaded language,” a way of blocking sexual and/or violent scenes that makes them “repeatable, manageable, and documentable.”¹⁰ Sexualized language becomes a written series of movements. Suddenly, the death of Desdemona feels closer to choreography than reality, deactivating the actor’s trauma sensors and allowing for vulnerability and recovery.

The industry has seen the effects of antiquated intimacy practices. Until the advent of intimacy education in 2006, actors were simply told to “go for it” in scenes of a sexual or sexually violent nature. At its worst, this led to physical assault: Professor Adam Noble recalls a student in the early 2000s assaulting another as the two attempted to block Blanche’s rape scene on their own¹¹; all it takes is a simple Google search to encounter the horror stories of Old Hollywood and Broadway. To a less intense degree, this lack of guidance can lead to dangerous mental gymnastics. Tonia Sina, now an intimacy director herself, recalls an adulterous showmance as a result of staging a sexual scene on her own.¹² Continues Pereyra in her essay: “Our minds may know violence onstage is part of play, but our bodies don’t.” These enduring dangers to the actor can be almost entirely negated by the use of trauma-informed pedagogy.

The same style of approach can apply to the audience, utilized by way of contemporary interpretation of classical works. After all, as director Nathan Singh observes, “If we were completely healed from the roots of those traumas [of the past], we wouldn’t be doing these plays anymore.”¹³ The messages of classical theatre still apply; they must simply be reimagined and restaged.

The first improvement comes in centering the female protagonist, treating her as a full human. Two phenomenal examples of this in the past decade or so are Dr. Nora Williams’s *Measure (Still) for Measure* and Julie Proudfoot’s *Medea*. The former is a highly collaborative restaging of Shakespeare’s infamous problem play, shifting slightly in each iteration. Williams brings Isabella to the forefront, asking the devising teams she works with what lines matter most and how to center Isabella’s story; this has led to some lovely queries on gender, queer identity, and sexual harassment. As Dr. Williams herself has said, “we can treat...Shakespeare’s words as inspiration...as something we can draw on as opposed to the thing that’s defining our process.”¹⁴ A similar situation occurred with Proudfoot’s 2021 audio play of *Medea*. Crafting an aural world out of Medea’s monologues allowed for an unapologetic antihero, highlighting female complexity and sexist strife in a way both horrifying and empathetic. Allowing these classical women to be main characters in all their complication—villainous, heroic, strong, scared—is yet another way to address the inherent misogyny within classical lines.

Additionally, a further query to ask oneself: what is necessary to show within these plays? What suddenly becomes gratuitous upon adaptation? This is not as applicable to the oldest plays mentioned, of course, as most brutality occurs offstage, but when one comes to the violence of a Williams or O’Neill play, for instance, what needs to be shown onstage? Oftentimes, violence against women holds the function of pornography as opposed to necessity, prompting the glamorization of abusive relationships as opposed to realistic illustration. This has a high possibility of causing the aforementioned trauma response. It is of utmost importance to ask these questions, wonderfully aided by an intimacy director.

Utilizing trauma-informed practices leads to actor safety and interpretations better-suited for a 21st century audience. That collaboration, in turn, leads the theatre to realistic yet sensitive illustrations of the all-too-real traumas of sexism and sexual violence. Along with the introduction of classical female-identifying playwrights, it allows the audience to actively process trauma in a healthy way, and to see their female characters as the women of autonomy and intellect they were and are. This is how the theatre begins to produce classical works in a post-#MeToo era. By listening, by learning, and by teaching their artists and audiences how to find the beauty without ignoring the pain. That, as playwright Cecilia

Copeland writes, “will change ‘rape culture’ from simply being on our stages to being the much needed subject of our work.”¹⁵ The artistry of the classics doesn’t have to die; it simply needs to adapt.

Works Cited

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