

Performing Gender in the Theatre

An Analysis of Gender Performance in an Original Play



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Becoming a Woman: Gender as Performative Act

“One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” - Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Sex = reproductive organs / Gender = personal identity & role in society

Judith Butler refers to gender as a “performative act”: an identity which an individual constantly constructs throughout their life with their words, actions and choices.

The way one “performs gender” is similar to how an actor performs on stage.

Gender Bending in the Theatre



“Indeed, the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence” (Butler, 1988)



Semiotics of Theatre and Drama

- Everything on stage exists as a sign (i.e. an object on stage + the meaning it conveys)
- Two simultaneous worlds exist on stage: the world of the play (the story) and the world of the actor (the portrayal of the story)
- Everything about an actor's body is considered to be relevant to their character (sex, clothing, facial structure, scars, moles, tone of voice, etc.)
- The audience enters a theatre with personal experiences, opinions, preconceptions, and expectations, which shape the way they perceive a play

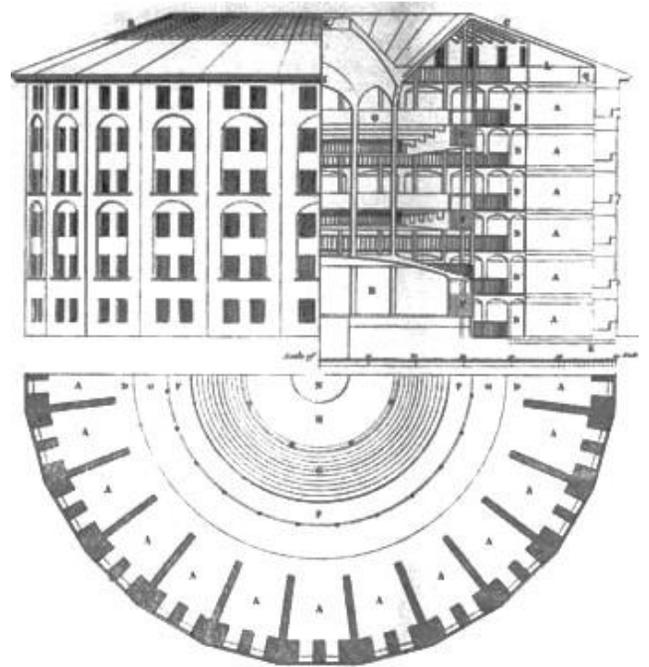
Panopticon, Theatre, and Gender Policing,

A new type of prison, introduced by Jeremy Bentham, where the guards can see the prisoners, but the prisoners cannot see the guards. Thus, the knowledge that they are always being watched regulates the behavior of the prisoners.

“Spectator-performer communication will affect, if nothing else, the degree of the actor’s commitment to his work” (Elam, 2002).

“...as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (Butler, 1988).

Thus, people police their own gender and the gender expression of those around them.



Stanislavky's System

Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863 – 1938), Russian actor and director, founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, where he:

- rejected “mechanical acting”
- developed an approach to acting that created truthful performances on stage
- encouraged actors to use their imagination in order to fully understand the given circumstances of the play and the inner objectives that motivate the actions of their character.
- introduced the concept of emotional memory, in which actors can draw on their own life experiences in order to connect with their character, however, rejected the idea at the end of his life. American Lee Strasberg later developed it into the “Method”.

Theatre of the Absurd

In philosophy, the “Absurd” is the attempt to find an inherent meaning in a meaningless universe.

- Began in 1950's Europe
- Defied the conventions of traditional theatre (i.e. the rules in Aristotle's *Poetics*)
- Lack of logic and coherence
- Repetitive dialogue
- Wordplay
- Points out the meaninglessness of human existence
- The futility of language
- Frequently features two eccentric men as the leads



Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*



Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ar Dead*

Syzygy: An Original Absurdist Play

Alex and Dante are the first human test-subjects aboard a train which is heading for the future at near-light speed. Seven days, one windowless compartment, and nothing to do.

A circular narrative performed as two identical acts

Act 1 – Alex is played by a woman

Act 2 – Alex is played by a man

Dante is played by the same person both times

The performances must be as similar as possible because the *character* is the same. Thus, in many ways, the acting becomes “mechanical”

The aim of the creative project was to see how one’s preconceptions about gender affect his/her interpretation of two very similar performances.



Sona Poghosyan (left) as Alex and Alex Mikayelyan (right) as Dante in Act 1
https://drive.google.com/open?id=0ByK_WiiVgJ60TTNVZ1BrazN0T0k



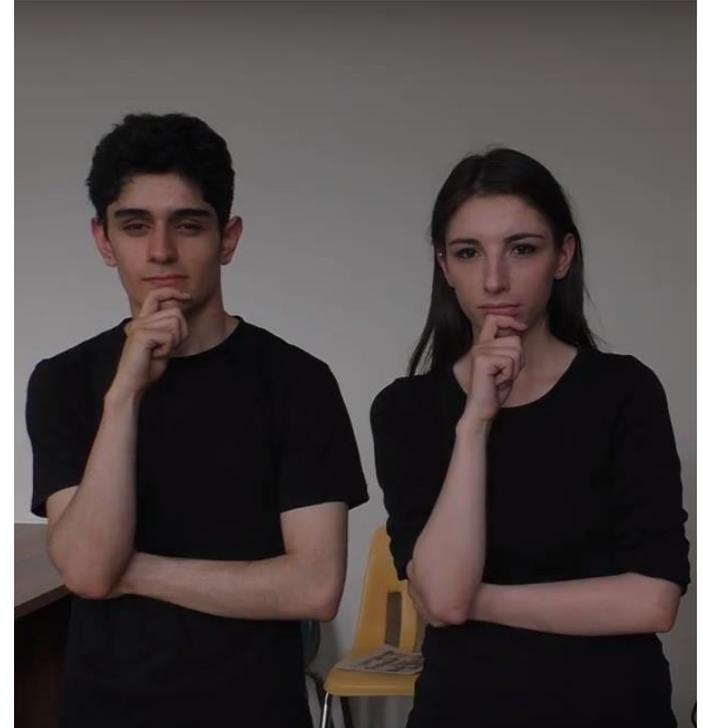
Andranik Davtyan (left) as Alex Mikayelyan (right) as Dante in Act 2
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The Components of the Creative Project

- Writing a script which contains no signifiers of gender (he, she, his, her, etc.) to describe Alex
- Several read-throughs, where readers were asked to read the script and discuss Alex's physical sex, gender expression, and relationship with Dante in both acts. All readers initially pictured Alex as a man, but agreed that s/he could also be a woman.
- Rehearsals of an abridged script (due to time constraints), in which we attempted to achieve near-identical, gender neutral performances from the actors playing Alex
- A live workshop performance for a focus group and discussion.

The Audience's Thoughts Summarized

- Female Alex seemed confident and aggressive
- Male Alex seemed shy and unsure of himself
- Male Alex and Dante had better chemistry
- Female Alex and Dante were more argumentative
- Societal norms about gender influence our expectations of how people should act on stage



“I could see that the acting was the same, the way they were sitting and their facial expressions were the same - they were both introverted - but I would still catch myself interpreting their introversion differently. When a man is being introverted, we think that he’s just not in the mood to socialize, but when a girl is introverted, we think she’s being bitchy and stand-offish” – *Anna Ter-Gabrielyan*, fourth-year E&C student.