

Chapter Four: Composing the Performance through the Physical and Visual Texts

Introduction

As previously stated in the introduction, my critical question was inspired by Setoodeh's *Newsweek* article "Straight Jacket" where he commented that Sean Hayes was not fit to play a heterosexual role in *Promises, Promises* because he was gay. His comments reinforced strict cultural constructions of gender and sexuality as dictated by the ideologies of a patriarchal society. My critical question was "How can I as an actor negotiate the signifiers of gender and sexuality in performance and recognize the fluidity between both ends of the gender spectrum?" After investigating the problematic historical relationship of gender and sexuality in twentieth-century American theatre, semiotics in theatre, and the theories of Judith Butler, Sue-Ellen Case, and Diane Torr, I created a devised performance titled *The Electric Current*. To answer my critical question, the performance was designed around scenes from *Take Me Out*, *Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches* and *Cloud 9* in addition to original narration designed to connect all the pieces together as one cohesive unit.

To explain how this devised performance answered my critical question, the following outlines how I used the physical and visual texts to create this production. Topics to be discussed about the physical text include how I constructed my characters' movement based on Torr's theories, the blocking incorporated in the performance, and the casting decisions I made. The visual text of the performance will consist of a

discussion of how the silhouette screen was constructed and utilized, how the costumes were used, and how the “electrical current” became a theme of the performance. After outlining and explaining the elements of the physical and visual texts used to create this devised production, there will be a discussion of the feedback that I received for this production through the performance talk-back night and the Department of the Theatre and Dance Roundtable discussion. My analysis of the criticism and feedback from this performance will help note how well my critical question was answered based on these reactions and comments.

The Physical Text

To explore how gender and sexuality is fluid through semiotics, I relied upon Torr’s notes from her “Man for a Day” Workshop to compose the movement of the characters I played: Darren from *Take Me Out* and Joe from *Angels in America Part I*. Since these characters appear “straight” in terms of their outward appearance, I needed to study and practice how to make my body operate as a heterosexual male. While I was constructing these qualities of movement for Darren and Joe, I focused on composing their images separately to portray how their gender construction was influenced by patriarchal ideology. In contrast, I constructed Betty’s movement for my scene in *Cloud 9* to demonstrate how her identity as a woman was restricted in terms of operating in a patriarchal environment. Since I am a male playing a female character, I used Torr’s idea’s of typical male behavior and movement in opposition. In addition to

creating the movements of these character, I also had to adjust my voice to fit the personality and gender construction of the characters I was playing.

Darren's Physical Construction

To create Darren's quality of movement, I imagined his gestures as direct and sharp because he appears to be a god-like figure. For example, Torr points out that male gestures tend to be direct in order to emphasize not embellish. She notes that a male can point his forefinger during specific moments of a line to emphasize their point (265). Darren becomes very direct when he yells at Kippy by declaring "*This is how* it is with me, *this is how* it has always been" (Greenberg 49). Certain gestures, such as pointing his finger, making a fist or clenching together his hands were placed upon Darren to reinforce his hyper-masculine identity. I also worked on ways in which Darren's body conveys how his presence takes up space, signifying that he is in his territory, which is in a locker room in this case. Torr provides insight into how to take up space noting that by acting as if the space is yours, you can signal that you are comfortable in the space and your surroundings (Torr 265). Torr also comments that "each time that your foot steps on the floor, it owns that piece of the floor for the period that it rests there" (266). With this idea, Darren's movement throughout the locker room conveyed that he has ownership of the space with each step that he takes because he is walking within his territory. As Darren entered the space, I made sure that my feet pounded on the floor to

show not just how angry he was in that moment, but how he charged through the space to declare that he was present in the locker room.

The movement of an apparent straight male character is important to construct because there needs to be an emphasis on how Darren walks through the locker room. Torr comments that the movement of males comes from the shoulders with frozen hips. When walking, Torr suggests to move by shifting your weight from side-to-side as a way to take up more space. She also notes that when men walk, they move their bodies around like blocks, so you cannot move from your waist. Instead, you need to turn your whole body around to face the other direction (266). Darren's quality of movement became very rigid and did not appear feminine. This was accomplished by walking around a rehearsal space by leading with my heels first on the ground to warm up into his style of movement as a strict male heterosexual construct.

Though the locker rooms for major league baseball players may be great in size, I had to create an intimate setting for *Take Me Out* because I performed in a small thrust stage environment. So Darren's movement throughout the space was purposeful with each step to communicate his dominance as a male. As Butler notes that patriarchal ideology restricts gender into binaries, Darren's identity is also oppressed by this ideology because the construction of his identity is not compatible within the construction of a heterosexual male. While Darren provides signals from his movement and gestures that he is a heterosexual male, in reality he is gay. His sexuality then

disrupts all of the other signifiers that portray him as a straight male. His hidden signifier, (his homosexuality) throws off all of these other signals and instead highlights that he is gay. With Sue Ellen Case's idea that semiotics can disrupt the alliance between the codes and patriarchal ideals, his hidden signifier deconstructs his straight masculine image and separates him away from the influence of patriarchal ideology. I placed his hidden signifier within his chest because I believe as an actor that he is a character that leads with his chest to express his dominance and command of respect as a male.

The hidden signifier, an element of his identity that he tries to conceal from the public, can be imagined as a necklace that rests upon his chest to further reinforce his image as a god-like figure. All of his masculine energy is centralized in his chest, so if he loses that energy, he won't be able to continue communicating his strong heterosexual male construction. The hidden signifier sits in his chest, unnoticeable, until Kippy points out to Darren that he is no longer a god-like man. The prominence of his chest drops to demonstrate that his hidden signifier for being gay has been activated, communicating that he feels "demoted" because of his identity as a baseball player who is gay. It looked as if the hidden signifier has weight on his chest because he feels that his image as a straight male has been compromised by his sexuality.

Darren's voice needed to display his hyper-masculinity as a baseball player, so I adjusted my voice by slightly lowering it to convey his raw anger and boastful personality. To achieve this quality of voice, it was important to keep some of Darren's

speech slurred to reinforce his rough attitude as a baseball player. There were certain bits of the dialogue written in by Greenberg to give an idea of how Darren would sound. For example, when Darren gets really mad in the scene, he yells “You think you’re gonna get this torrent of me, commin’ at ya?” (Greenberg 49). I paid attention to lines like this to remind myself that Darren’s speech needed to sound natural. So my diction as an actor was relaxed to reinforce the patriarchal construction of his heterosexual male gender.

Joe’s Physical Construction

Though Darren’s movement was created to show off his dominant personality and how his identity is restricted through his movement, Joe’s movement and physical presence in *Angels in America* demonstrated his desperation to oppress his sexuality by relying on his masculine image. Since Joe feels a lot of pressure from his religious ideology to be morally straight, I composed his stance to appear stiff and cautious to signal that he was afraid of alluding or revealing his sexuality. To reinforce this appearance, there were moments where Joe used direct gestures to emphasize to Louis that he was not gay. By angrily pointing his finger, and slamming his suitcase on the ground, he was trying to reaffirm to Louis his straight male construction. Since Joe felt threatened by Louis’s inquiry into his sexuality, his arms remained tight and unmovable to communicate that he was trying to hold together his straight masculine image. These direct gestures also served as tactics to defend his heterosexual male construct by