

Big Daddy Lives OR Don't Say the F Word

Feminist Directing in Theory and in Practice

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word is a part scripted, part devised performance piece that stages scenes from classic and contemporary plays using directing theory written by feminists, for feminists. The play was performed on February 27, 28, and March 1 at the UVic Phoenix Theatre by an ensemble of six actors who were selected through an audition process. As a second part of the research process, focus groups will be held with the actors, designers, and stage manager of the show to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the rehearsal and production process.

THE TEAM

Stage Manager: Maggie Lees

Set/Costume Designer: Corina Fischer

Lighting Designer: Hina Nishioka

Sound Designer: Eva Hocking

Actors/Devisers: Tabatha Hamilton, Annie Konstantinova, Alysha Moffatt, Darius Konstant, and Lucien Lum

FEMINIST DIRECTING?

The Department of Theatre at UVic offers a series of courses in directing. The assigned readings in these classes are usually written by white men describing similar techniques. In reading these texts, it is very clear to me that the authors, despite offering solid techniques from time to time, were not thinking of female, queer, and/or racialized theatre practitioners when they wrote their books. When I first came up with the concept for this project, I started researching directing textbooks and handbooks that were not taught in my classes. What I found was a small section of the literature that advocated for directing practices that were inclusive of and/or written by people of colour, women, and queer people. Particularly inspirational to me was the book edited by Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theatre as if Gender and Race Matter*. Donkin and Clement's concept of "Big Daddy" (a character from Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) as representative of the normalized sexism present in the theatre industry was at the heart of the curating, directing, and devising process.



Darius Konstant as Big Daddy. Photo by Emily Lindstrom, 2019.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS & OBJECTIVES

QUESTIONS:

1. How does applying feminist theory to theatre directing alter the traditional process?
2. What kinds of feminist strategies and techniques work best when working with actors, designers, and stage management?
3. What challenges are posed by undertaking a feminist directing practice?

OBJECTIVES:

1. Put the spotlight on feminist directing theories which are not taught at the Phoenix.
2. Comment on the sexism present in the directing handbooks and theories which are taught at the Phoenix.
3. Expose a team of student actors, designers, and stage management to feminist theatre practices and literature.



The cast of *Big Daddy Lives or Don't Say the F Word*. From left to right, Annie Konstantinova, Darius Konstant, Tabatha Hamilton, Alysha Moffatt, and Lucien Lum. Photo by Emily Lindstrom, 2019.

THE SCRIPT & THE STRATEGIES

With the above research questions and objectives in mind, I constructed a script by selecting scenes from four different plays and interspersing them with voiceovers quoting both feminist and popular directing theory to showcase the stark contrast in how the authors talk about gender. I also incorporated some monologues which I wrote myself to create a through-line that connected the piece through the actors asking a series of questions to the audience.

VOICEOVERS AS SHAPING INTERPRETATION

The monologue I chose from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, by Tennessee Williams was, of course, one given by Big Daddy, in which he talks about how tired of his wife he is and describes a fantasy about paying to have sex with a "choice one." This monologue gave context to the play's title, and, while vulgar, served to encourage the audience to view the character from a classic play in a new light. To help shape the way the audience viewed the monologue, voiceover quotes from *Upstaging Big Daddy* were played before and after, explaining the metaphor of "Big Daddy" in the theatre industry.

PARODY & SATIRE

Next in the play was a scene from *How I Learned to Drive*, by Paula Vogel, which sought to answer a question that an actress asked before the scene began: "How did we learn to put up with

Big Daddy?" The scene showed a young woman, Li'l Bit, and her mother and grandmother at the kitchen table, talking about men and sex. The scene shows perpetuates the idea that men are the ones who "take" sex and women are the ones who "give" it. The scene was presented with over-the-top delivery, and brightly coloured costumes to satirize the internalized sexism clearly present in the characters.

STAGING SOCIAL/POLITICAL CONTEXT

Oleanna, by David Mamet, was staged using two subversive strategies. Preceding the play, a real interview with Mamet was staged, verbatim, in which he makes ignorant comments about the themes of sexual harassment in his play. Staging the social and political context of the play served to shape the way the audience viewed the upcoming scene. The scene itself was interpreted by the actors using a feminist lens, making the female character much more credible than in other productions.

GENDER SWAPPING

Finally, a scene from the quintessential play, *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen was staged with one key difference: the main female character was played by a man and the main male character was played by a woman. This change in gender dynamics transformed the scene; instead of being about a controlling husband and a ditzy wife, the scene showcased a loving, equitable relationship.

KEY FINDINGS

ALTERING THE DIRECTING PROCESS

Directing from a feminist perspective differed from the traditional directing process in the following ways:

- The hierarchy was broken down; as the director, I was not seen as the only one capable of making creative decisions or coming up with ideas.
- Analyzing, discussing, and rehearsing scenes was a much more collaborative process, with feedback from other members of the company valued as a way to further the knowledge and growth of the scene in question.
- More rehearsal time needed to be allotted for discussion to allow for actors to explore the roles reflexively and connect the work to their own experience and identity.
- The focus was taken off of achieving technical excellence. Instead, the company explored how best to achieve our goals for the show and how we wanted to impact the audience.

THE SUCCESSES

- Using tools such as voiceovers, unrealistic cardboard costumes, and meta-theatrical monologues allowed us to speak directly to the audience about the issues at hand. I developed a "theatrical bibliography;" voiceovers and actors cited theorists and playwrights aloud in MLA format. This emphasized the understated importance of scholarship and research, in the process of making theatre.
- Staging the social and political context of *Oleanna* proved to be an effective way to provoke a new way of thinking about the popular play. David Mamet and John, the character in the play, were dressed identically to comment on how the playwright cannot be completely separated from the play.

THE CHALLENGES

- Fear of failure and change. Early in the rehearsal process, the actors, the stage manager, and I struggled to let go of what was familiar to us. The stage manager was scared to participate in the artistic process, the actors were scared of having gaps in the script to fill with their own content, and I was scared that the whole show would be a disaster. The show was *process-oriented* rather than *results-oriented*, and once we gained familiarity with the process, we were able to collaborate to create beautiful results.
- Devising. Making devised theatre (unscripted theatre that is created by a group of people) is often a challenging process, but in this case, I did not know how much devising we would be doing ahead of time; I wanted the group to decide what they wanted to create and where they wanted it to go in the show. Although this was a daunting concept, allowing room for devising in the process enriched the show in a way something written by a single person could not do.



Lucien Lum as Nora, and Annie Konstantinova as Torvald in the gender-swapped scene from *A Doll's House*. Photo by Emily Lindstrom, 2019.