

A black and white photograph of a woman's profile, facing right. She has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a large, circular, metallic earring. Her eyes are closed, and she has a serene expression. A violin is visible in the lower right corner, with its body and strings partially in view. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the contours of her face and hair. The top of the image has a solid red background where the title is located.

Acts of Passion

Sexuality, Gender and Performance

Nina Rapi
Maya Chowdhry
e d i t o r s

*Nina Rapi
Maya Chowdhry
Editors*

Acts of Passion: Sexuality, Gender and Performance

Acts of Passion: Sexuality, Gender and Performance has been co-published simultaneously as *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, Volume 2, Numbers 2/3 1998.

*Pre-publication
REVIEWS,
COMMENTARIES,
EVALUATIONS . . .*

“Acts of Passion is witty, well informed and intelligently partisan. Its clarity of purpose in charting the energy and vitality of current lesbian performance is played out in the text whose coherence lies in the commitment of the contributing practitioners, academics and practitioner-critics to speaking across the critical/practice divide. Critical practice informs cogent analysis; personal memoir and descriptive pieces by artists converse with theoretical issues. The whole mix is rich, focused and up to the moment. It's a lively, wide-ranging book, a credit to its editors. . . . I can imagine myself using it in teaching and for research to present the diversity and scope of lesbian performance today.”

Claire MacDonald

*Senior Lecturer and Research Fellow
De Montfort University, UK
and Co-Editor, Performance Research*

More pre-publication

REVIEWS, COMMENTARIES, EVALUATIONS . . .

“A *cts of Passion* is a welcome addition to the canon of cultural theory and critical debate around contemporary performance. This long overdue, but nonetheless significant and impressive, publication draws together a diversity of positions, practices and polemics in relation to post modern lesbian performance and puts them firmly on the contemporary cultural map.

Acts of Passion is an entertaining, provocative and influential collection that comfortably blends complex cultural theory with moving personal testimony to offer an overview of one of the most exciting developments in contemporary performance that cannot, and should not, be negated or ignored.”

Lois Keidan

Director of Live Arts

Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

“This collection proves that the traditional lesbian double negative of ‘female and queer’ is now a positive, innovative force. Each essay reveals how lesbians are opening up new forms of expression in performance, from burlesque to drag king to more abstract dance. . . .

A range of experiences and voices are well-represented, from theoretical analysis to practical performance. . . . An important book, that truly blasts the binaries of masculine and feminine in performance today.”

Lucy O’Brien

Author of She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul



More pre-publication

REVIEWS, COMMENTARIES, EVALUATIONS . . .

“**A**cts of Passion is a passionate book in two senses. It is written, with feeling, by a number of women who live, ‘act’ and continually re-enact, embody and otherwise employ the personal and public politics about which they write. It also dares to tempt the tempestuous subjects of sexuality, gender and performance with a style which crosses over from academic to journalistic to performative and poetic, back to instructive and out to outrageous, finally looping back on itself to invite the reader to ‘try this at home.’

The book is both transdisciplinary and nonhierarchical in focus and aim. . . . The book crosses generic borders by moving easily from theatre to music to dance, live art to multimedia installation and CD-ROM, comedy to club culture, all framed by a layer of critical self-analysis.

Rapi and Chowdhry’s skill in selecting and editing the pieces is evident. The free rein they obviously gave to contributors lends the book an open-ended, slightly quirky and wonderfully readable feel. It is a delight to be informed by a book which evidently enjoys itself and a joy to be delighted by a book which provides a wealth of evidence to support the basic idea that lesbian theatrical representations have much to uncover and discover and

recover for those who dare to look. The book is irreverent and funny at times, contentious in intent and effect, highly serious and well argued in part, and well worth a read overall.”

Lizbeth Goodman

Lecturer in Literature

The Open University, UK



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Acts of Passion: Sexuality, Gender and Performance

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Maya Chowdhry, MA
Editors

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Maya Chowdhry, MA, is an award-winning playwright, poet, writer, and Live Artist. Her plays include: *Kaahini* (Birmingham Repertory Company, 1998, and Red Ladder Theater Company, National Tour 1997), *An Appetite for Living* (West Yorkshire Playhouse, 1997), and *Splinters* (Bradford Theatre in the Mill, 1997). She has written four plays for BBC Radio including *Monsoon* (1991). *Monsoon*, a winner in the 1991 BBC Young Playwrights Festival, was nominated for the 1993 BBC Newcomers award at the Prix Futura in Berlin and was published in *Six Plays by Black and Asian Women Writers* (Aurora Metro Publications, 1993). The author of "Shooting the Shots," a critical chapter published in *Talking Black: Lesbians of African and Asian Descent Speak Out* (Cassell, 1994), she has won much acclaim for her widely published poetry and fiction. Ms. Chowdhry, recipient of a Live Art commission from the Institute of Contemporary Arts, has performed and taught nationally and internationally. In 1994, she

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Acts of Passion: Sexuality, Gender and Performance

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INTRODUCTIONS

Representing the 'Real'

Nina Rapi

Is 'the real' any more real than its representation? Real to whom? The writer, the performer, those represented, or the audience? Can fantasy be said to be more 'real' than reality, especially when it is repeatedly and ritualistically enacted in everyday situations as, for example, with the masquerade of femininity (the performance of everyday life), or on a more conscious level with drag kings? Is this theatre or life? What if that fantasy is structured into a staged performance (e.g., lesbian drag queens), presented in front of a paying audience? Is it still a fantasy or does it become 'real' on stage? And talking of 'real' who is a real lesbian anyway?

In other words, dear reader, in these post-modern days of fragmentation, un/reality, and non-fixity of self, identity and sexuality, you can easily lose count of what is what, not to mention of who you 'really' are. In this collection, we have worked towards some

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kind of synthesis. Tricky word, I know, but what can a dyke do if she's had enough of either/or situations. Be that either theory or practice; essentialism or social constructionism; "authenticity" or deconstructionism; black or white; intellectual or experiential; Father's alienating *distance* or Mother's smothering *nearness*, etc. It seems that while contemporary theory struggles to deconstruct limiting binaries, it invariably re/constructs others in the process. Are 'binaries' inescapable or does theory divorced from everyday 'reality'/experience/practice inevitably get caught in the frame of reference it seeks to escape?

In this collection, therefore, you shall find both theoretical and practical contributions, experiential and deconstructionist, 'real' and 'hypereal.' What they all have in common is a desire to understand and communicate the ways in which sexuality, gender and performance are expressed and interconnected.

PERFORMATIVITY

A lot has been written recently about performativity and performance.¹ Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology and Performance Studies have inter-disciplined themselves to explore notions of 'life as theatre' and the 'realness of performance,' and the making of gender, sexual and racial identities through performative processes.

The concept of 'performativity' was first coined by the English philosopher J. L. Austin to identify the socio-cultural instances where saying something means doing something, where a speech becomes an act; e.g., "I take thee to be my lawful wife" is a speech that becomes an act, sanctioned by the performance of the marriage ceremony.

Further developed by philosophers Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, the notion of performativity has facilitated an understanding of how identities are formed through a complex process of citational instances.² Heterosexuality, for example, is understood by Butler to be constructed as an identity through continuous repetitions of an imagined original.

Lesbians then, who are often criticized for copying heterosexuality, Butler argues, only copy a copy and never an original since an original never actually exists.³

Taking this further I would argue that we, lesbians in a western context, are engaged in a continuous de/re/construction of our sexual identities through a mix and match process, whereby lesbian becomes a combination of the cultural constructs 'man' and 'woman'; of the social reality 'dyke' as she has developed over the last fifty years; and any additional elements produced by the individual's imagination and influenced by the specific sub-cultures she might belong to. These could be either national sub-cultures, such as Jewish or Greek, Asian or Arab, Jamaican or Nigerian or British Black; and/or other socio-cultural groupings such as drug culture, ragga/goth/pop scene, anarcho-feminists, squatters, etc. Hence the infinite lesbian personae: *drag kings and transgender lesbians*; *butch* (baby butch, camp butch, dandy butch, stone butch, 'boy,' ragga dyke, papa, diesel dyke, Bulldagger, S & M dyke, daddy boy); *femme* (high femme, camp femme, baby femme, top femme, mama, S & M femme, Riot Grrrl, punky femme, goth femme, ragga girl, gay girl, rude girl, babe); *androgynous* (zami, khush, hermaphrodyke, cyberdyke, cardigan lesbians, power lesbians).

How much of this diversity actually makes it to the stage? Not a lot, unfortunately. What is known as lesbian theatre or more recently as lesbian performance still largely remains a 'nice' white, Anglo-Saxon affair. We hope this collection makes a further difference in that it includes artists and writers who are stretching this narrow perimeter.

THE MARGIN AND THE CENTER

Lesbian Theatre as such, unlike gay theatre, has mostly survived on the fringe. This has had a double effect on its development. On the one hand, an assumed lesbian audience has enabled a certain freedom and experimentation with form and content unlikely in a straight environment. On the other hand, it has meant low production standards, non-critically assessed work and a certain complacency. Also, the experimentation has largely remained within rather fixed boundaries, often within those of pastiche.

Audience wise, a non-critical audience can have a stagnating effect on the artist. Further, pastiche relies a lot on the audience being able to read certain lesbian codes and conventions, on being

'in.' This of course is both inclusive and exclusive at once. And while any sub-culture inevitably has its own systems of signs, often incomprehensible to outsiders, lesbian theatre needs to 'decodify' itself, make itself accessible and visible in order to make any lasting difference. Besides, pastiche, which can rarely offer more than mere entertainment value, increasingly leaves lesbian spectators dissatisfied and disappointed, turning for something more challenging and meaningful to mainstream culture.

Very little 'serious' lesbian theatre has emerged, and by that I mean 'universal', i.e., theatre which may originate in a very specific angle/situation (e.g., lesbian) but manages to "shift the axis of categorization"⁴ and make that specific situation part of the world's experience.⁵ While a few individual playwrights have made it into the mainstream, despite controversial subject matter (Sarah Daniels, Sarah Kane), and/or experimental structures (Phyllis Nage), they haven't necessarily produced 'universal' theatre except, ironically, by carefully avoiding any lesbian subject matter, such as Sarah Kane in her ground-breaking "Blasted" and "Phaedra's Love."⁶ Can lesbians then only break through to the mainstream by de-lesbianising their work? Or by denying they are 'lesbian' playwrights?⁷

Does making 'universal' theatre necessitate 'mainstreaming'? Can we not produce 'universal' theatre in the ghetto? We certainly can. But how wide will its audience be? Theatre cannot develop without an audience that challenges it, without critical assessment that questions as well as encourages it, without production standards that free rather than limit the imagination. Engaging with the mainstream on our terms seems imperative, if we are not to simply witness 'lesbianism' manufactured into 'chic.' Alternative representations need to emerge.

The question of course remains of how far is it possible to engage with the dominant culture as an individual artist or group of artists, without being appropriated. I suggest that rather than accept an omnipotent all-consuming power inherent in dominant structures, it is both more productive and transgressive to search for the gaps/in-between spaces/ways of breaking through those structures with your sanity and artistic integrity intact. No one anyhow can totally exist *outside* the dominant culture, so we might as well claim the

power to change it from within since it's already *inside* us, hence to a degree subject to our individual agency. I believe that it is necessary now in the late nineties to devise and develop ways that constructively and effectively bridge the margin with the center, the sub-cultural with the dom-cultural, the fringe with the West End.

THE RISE OF THE SOLO PERFORMER

An interesting recent development in lesbian theatre in Britain has been the rise of the solo performer, who somehow epitomizes that bridge between the margin and the center. One such example is the dance theatre artist Emilyn Claid, who smoothly shifts between the dominant dance establishment of Sadler's Wells and the fringe dominion of Gay Sweatshop, the oldest Lesbian and Gay theatre company in Britain, which *still* remains in the fringe after 25 years of existence! [Gay Sweatshop has lost its funding and no longer exists.] Likewise, performance poet Patience Agbabi glides between the Royal Albert Hall and an unknown performance space in the East End of London, while Scottish stand-up comedian Rhona Cameron hosts prime-time T.V. shows *and* small, lesbian nightclubs like CUM in South London.

Lesbian drag queens and particularly drag kings have generated a lot of interest in the mainstream media and have been featured in T.V. chat shows and national newspapers. Has this helped reshape and redefine gender as something culturally constructed and fluid? Has it produced a wider acceptability of the diversity of lesbians? It is hard to assess without detailed statistical evidence, but empirically many lesbians, myself included, have noted how much easier it has become in the urban centers, at least, to be openly a dyke. It attracts a lot less hostility; if anything hostility has been replaced by a strange mix of fascination and curiosity. But curiosity is never a bad thing. It leads to asking questions.

LESBIAN AESTHETICS

What of lesbian aesthetics then? Can one be said to exist? It appears that historically three strands of lesbian theatre—here simply

defined as theatre created by lesbians and foregrounding the lesbian experience—have emerged: lesbian theatre companies, individual playwrights, and solo performers. At the risk of generalizing, I'd venture asserting that the lesbian theatre companies of the seventies and eighties, and the playwrights closely associated with them (e.g., Siren and Tash Fairbanks; Bryony Lavery and Dramatrix; Holly Hughes and Split Britches), have predominantly produced pastiche, at times of a dark kind (e.g., Holly Hughes's *dykenoir*). The Butch and Femme dynamic runs through most of their productions and to a large degree is defining their aesthetic.⁸ In the nineties, new theatre companies such as Spin/Stir and ObScene have become a lot more experimental in both form and content, combining a 'feminine aesthetic' with the theatre of the absurd.

Individual playwrights of the eighties and nineties such as Sarah Daniels, Penny Casdagli, Maya Chowdhry, Jackie Kay, Phyllis Nage, Nina Rapi and Jacqueline Rudet have employed a number of different forms, styles and structures: from realism to surrealism; from drama to tragi-comedy; from linear to elliptical to choreopoem.⁹

However, despite the apparent differences between the companies and the individual playwrights, certain common characteristics can be detected. In a paper I wrote a few years ago I identified the following elements for a lesbian theatre aesthetic: "the freedom-confinement dynamic, with or without role-playing but definitely with inter-subjective reciprocity; 'distancing' role from 'essential being,' and 'woman' and 'man,' the social constructs, from male and female, the biological entities, either through butch and femme or androgyny."¹⁰ It was further added that the socio-cultural positioning of the playwright will further influence her aesthetic, such as Jackie Kay's choreopoem written in the tradition established by Ntozake Shange. Petra Koppers identifies a possible lesbian aesthetic as "the embrace of disruption, the embrace of the Grotesque."¹¹ Bonnie Zimmerman asserts that "in general, lesbian critical reading proposes the blurring of boundaries between self and other, subject and object, lover and beloved, as the lesbian moment in any text."¹²

Artists who certainly seem to personify this blurring of self and other in their work, as Barbra Egervary points out, are solo perform-

ers like Helena Goldwater and Helen Paris. Their aesthetic appears to be that of 'The Monstrous Feminine,' as Egervary terms it.¹³

Drag queens such as Cathy P, Queenie aka Valerie Mason-John, and Amy Lane use mostly pastiche, even though Queenie is venturing into new territory with her new short show "Sweep under the Carpet," a biting satire.

Stand-up comedians like Rhona Cameron mentioned above, Donna McPhail, Lia Delaria and Maria Esposito, are fast establishing a dykerap form of comedy that certainly reveals gender to be an artificial construct, played around by dykes on stage, at will.

THE FUTURE

It used to be said in the seventies that the 'Future is Female.' It has been claimed by gay men in positions of power, no less,¹⁴ that the future of theatre is lesbian. Is this true?

There is certainly an energy and vitality in current lesbian performance that is unprecedented. This, however, has mostly manifested itself in solo work. The new companies that have emerged in the nineties and the old ones that continue to exist (e.g., Split Britches) are yet to make any major inroads into arenas other than strictly lesbian. As such, their influence remains limited.

Individual playwrights are continuing to create work that crosses the boundaries between the lesbian sub-culture and a wider audience. But how far are they allowed to succeed? In the British context at least, "name" lesbians can comfortably be counted with the fingers of one hand. And even so, it appears that mainstream media and/or the dominant theatre can only really accommodate *one* name lesbian playwright at a time. Witness the demise of Sarah Daniels upon the rise of Phyllis Nage, and the demise of Phyllis Nage upon the rise of Sarah Kane. Other playwrights like Penny Casdagli, Maya Chowdhry, Jackie Kay, Nina Rapi and Jacqueline Rudet, widely produced and published, enjoy varying degrees of recognition but remain unknown by the wider public with the exception of Jackie Kay, who is mostly known for her poetry though. Bryony Lavery is another writer who has become accepted by the academic if not the critical establishment, while Tash Fairbanks has given up in disgusted anger at all the obstacles she has faced and still has to face.¹⁵

Overall, I would argue that the future of lesbian performance

looks rather promising. This optimism is largely based on the confidence evinced by lesbian practitioners, as well as the changes that have incurred in the past few years in the theatre world (in terms of venues, critical reception and production possibilities). Both are making the staging of lesbian work feasible in venues other than the traditional fringe 'black box.' It will be interesting to see the changes and developments in lesbian aesthetics as the venues, production standards, critical reception and audiences evolve. The result might very well be spectacular.

London, November 1996

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. PERFORMATIVITY AND PERFORMANCE, Andrew Parker & Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds. (Routledge 1995).
2. See BODIES THAT MATTER, Judith Butler (Routledge 1993).
3. See GENDER TROUBLE, Judith Butler (Routledge 1990), p. 31.
4. See "The Point of View: Universal or Particular," by Monique Wittig, *Feminist Issues*, Fall 1983, pp. 63-9.
5. This is an expression I read in James Baldwin's ANOTHER COUNTRY (Black Swan 1987), p. 116. It has somehow made a lasting impression on me.
6. BLASTED and PHAEDRA'S LOVE, by Sarah Kane (Methuen 1997).
7. See "Drama Queens: Ruling with a Rod of Irony," by Joelle Taylor, in this collection.
8. See "Towards a Butch/Femme Aesthetic," by Sue-Ellen Case in MAKING A SPECTACLE: FEMINIST ESSAYS ON CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S THEATRE, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), pp. 282-99.
9. See "That's why you are so Queer: The Representation of Lesbian Sexuality in Theatre," by Nina Rapi, in DARING TO DISSENT, ed. Liz Gibbs (Cassell, 1994), pp. 37-65.
10. See "Hide and Seek: The Search for a Lesbian Theatre Aesthetic," by Nina Rapi, in NEW THEATRE QUARTERLY, No. 34 (Cambridge University Press, May 1993), pp. 147-158.
11. See "Vanishing in your Face: Embodiment and Representation in Lesbian Dance Performance," by Petra Koppers, in this collection.
12. "Lesbians like this and like that," by Bonnie Zimmerman, in NEW LESBIAN CRITICISM, ed. Sally Munt (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 110.
13. See "Another Con-Text," by Barbra Egervary, in this collection.
14. Neil Bartlett, *Queer Up North*, 1994.
15. See "From Stage to Screen and Back," by Jan Goulden in this collection; and interview of Tash Fairbanks in FEMINIST STAGES, ed. Lizbeth Goodman, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996.