

What is Woman's Place in Contemporary Acting Theory? The Case of Pol Pelletier

Talking about contemporary acting theories is a challenge. The field is vast, and yet – for reasons that I will discuss further momentarily – only a very few theorists and practitioners of the theatre seem to stake out a place within his domain. Talking about acting theories in order to see what positions are occupied by the woman of the theatre is doubly challenging, if not altogether impossible; and yet I have chosen to address this topic here, because I feel that it is crucial for both the theatre and for feminist endeavors in all artistic fields.

I was astonished to discover that the issue of the woman's place in contemporary acting theory is ostensibly lacking from the majority of recent writings on woman's theatre, writings that solidly establish the foundations of a feminist theory of dramatic art.¹ Elizabeth Goodman is one of the rare critics who addresses this subject. In her book, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. Goodman insists on the importance of increasing the awareness of the work of actresses in the formulation of acting theory, saying that this heightened awareness is essential in order to allow a dialog to take place between theory and practice.² We cannot help but agree with this observation.

In taking note of the absence of concern with acting theories amongst feminist theorists of the theatre, I do not mean to deny the importance of the research of such authors as S. Bassnett³ and L. Ferris⁴, who have written about the work of woman on stage. I simply wish to indicate that woman remain absent from the field of acting theory.

The reasons behind this absence are complex and derive from at least two problems. Firstly, the issue of acting theory in a difficult one. (What is acting theory? What is its purpose? Can it truly influence theatre practice?) Secondly, for a long time now, woman have had difficulty addressing theoretical questions; it is only over the past twenty years or so, with the work of such theorists as J. Kristeva, L. Irigaray, A. Ubersfeld, and T. De Lauretis, that woman have started overcoming this obstacle which nonetheless persists today.

The issue of acting theories unites many different fields of study, and raises a number of far-reaching questions that I will outline here.

1. The first question concerns theory itself. What is involved in the nation of theory? How do we bridge the gap between those theories geared towards practice and those geared towards critique?

¹ Feminist theatre theory has the interest of shedding light on non-feminist works as well as feminist ones. Cf. Enoch Bratet, *Feminine Focus: The New Woman Playwrights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1988) and *Performing Feminism: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990); Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Michigan: University Microfilms Research Press, 1988) and *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1993); Linda Hart, *Making a Spectacle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); Linda Hart and Peggy Phelan, *Acting Out: Feminist Performances* (Ann Arbor: U. Of Michigan Press, 1993); Karen Laughlin and Catherine Schuler, *Theatre and Feminist Aesthetics* (Fairleigh: Dickinson U. Press, 1995); Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (U. Of Missouri, 1992); Elsteth Trobyn, *Sexing the Self, Gender Positions in Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 1993).

2. The second question concerns the idea of acting. What do we mean by "acting theory"? How can such a theory be build? Where is this intellectual exercise situated with reference to theatre practice? How much do practitioners value these theories? Who are the great thinkers in this field.

3. The third and final question that will be raised here is about woman. Assuming that there are many acting theories, what place do woman occupy among them? Who are the great contemporary thinkers in this area? What could a feminine viewpoint bring to new acting theories?

The issue addressed in this paper is a complex one indeed, as it goes far beyond the mere question of woman and theatre, to touch on all fundamental areas of theatre theory (the purpose of theory, the importance of acting theories). In fact, the interest of this topic lies in its very complexity, and in approaching acting theory as a woman's issue, I hope to show the special contribution that female artists could make to this field.

[...]

What is Acting Theory for Woman?

In order to illustrate my reflection I would like to concentrate on one example of an acting theory for woman: the method developed by Pol Pelletier and described in her article "Jouer au féminin"⁵ (which could be loosely translated as "Female Acting"). Pelletier is a feminist artist from Quebec who is extremely well-known in the Montreal theatre milieu.

Pol Pelletier revolts against the form of acting that the majority of woman use on stage, that is to say the form of acting where the actress body remains passive. She calls for an "active body", where the actress is not present merely to allow herself to be looked at, but in order to actually do something with her body, willfully engaging in an action.

The primary concern of the actress shouldn't be, "They're watching me", but rather "I'm watching what I'm doing, am totally involved in what I'm doing ...". The fact that the actress concentration on the action is so strong gives her a presence that captivates the audience ... Even if the actress is alone and immobile on stage, there is an interior activity, neurons working, the rhythm of blood coursing through veins, the activity of thought processes ... that create an electricity that travels through the air from atom to atom until it reaches the spectators.⁶

In this passage, Pelletier touches on two issues of primordial importance. Firstly, she insists that the actress must attract the attention of the audience not to herself as an object, but to the action that she is performing. Secondly, she emphasizes the necessity of creating bodies that accomplish actions. "I have the impression that what woman hold as most intimate is the body", says Pelletier, "whereas the most intimate thing for man is probably emotion."⁷

The female body, according to Pelletier, is restrained and restricted, hidden behind screens, and thus the centre of numerous tensions.

² "[A] new definition of 'feminist theatre' would most usefully be informed by the views of practitioners and the working practices of operative feminist companies," writes Goodman in *Contemporary Feminist Theatres*. Later in this same work she reinforces this idea, indicating that "[i]t might be possible to construct a theory of feminist theatre which informs, and is informed by, practice." (Elizabeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993), 10 and 238.)

³ Suzan Bassnett: "Towards a Theory of Woman's Theatre" in *Linguistic and Literary Studies in Eastern Europe* vol. 10: *The Semiotics of Drama and Theatre*, ed. Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Jon Benjamins, 1984); *Feminist Experiences: Three Woman's Movements in Four Cultures* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987); "Woman Experiment With Theatre: Magdalena '86", *New Theatre Quarterly* 3.1 (Aug. 1987), 224-223; "Perceptions of the Female Role", *New Theatre Quarterly* 3.1 (Aug. 1987), 234-236; *Magdalena: International Woman's Experimental Theatre* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1989).

⁴ L. Ferris, *Acting Women: Images of Woman in the Theatre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990).

⁵ *Pratiques théatrales* 16 (Montreal: Fall 1982), 11-21.

⁶ Pelletier, *op. cit.*, 12.

⁷ Pelletier, *op. cit.*, 13.

I watch the mobilization of energy manifesting itself, often unconsciously, as tension, nervous tics, that stiffen the body, immobilize it, force it into unnatural, restricting positions. For example, certain actresses have the oppressive habit of carrying all their weight on one leg, which results in the accentuation of the hip and thus of their "natural" curves. It also results in reducing the place the actress occupies on stage, and on shifting the center of gravity of such a way as to deprive her of balance, energy and solid grounding. She can have no more than a vague, weak, floating presence. Other actresses advance their head as if to show off their pretty face, and this necessarily creates a great deal of tension in the neck and jaw. It cuts the link that normally connects head, feet and limbs and permits expansion. Other actresses seem to be obsessed with the eyes ... Others with the mouth, a completely unnatural way of holding the mouth ... Or a way of using one's hands as if one was constantly handling delicate, little porcelain objects ...⁸

It takes someone like Pol Pelletier, who focuses on bodies on stage, their strengths and their weaknesses, to pinpoint all these tics and tensions. Pelletier is not the only theatre person to have made this sort of observation, however. Grotowski, for one, noted that the primary task of the actor was to separate himself from his everyday behavior and free any suppressed energy in order to achieve a state of neutrality. Pol Pelletier is in complete agreement with this. Thus, her work is not interesting for its originality so much as for its focus on female performers.

It is only in starting from a neutral position, a state free of tension and meaning, that we can create an interesting acting experience. The difficulty lies in the fact that in creating this neutrality, women tend to suffer a certain self-destruction. In undergoing intense actor-training with women, one cannot help but uncover vast abysses of emptiness.⁹

Roberta Sklar of New York's "Women's Experimental Theatre" referred to this same difficulty when she wrote that

The traditional approach to acting, stripping away layers, breaking down defenses and building up from nothing – didn't seem to apply to women. You don't break down a woman's defenses. She has learned to survive by developing defenses in a world that doesn't perceive her as part of the human race.¹⁰

Considering the evolution that feminism has undergone over the past fifteen years, it would be interesting to see if Sklar would say the same thing today. In any case, even today, the idea of "active body" described by Pol Pelletier remains central to the development of acting theories, especially theories for women, because the relationship of women to their bodies and to those of others is based on an immense historical and social heritage. In fact, it is this very heritage that performers as diverse as Laurie Anderson and Karen Finley seek to subvert.¹¹

The promotion of neutrality is a good precept, but what are the results of emptying the mind and body of all tensions and distractions? What are the effects of the neutralization process? According to Pol Pelletier, neutral bodies enter into contact with archetypes.

⁸ Pelletier, *op. cit.*, 14.

⁹ Pelletier, *op. cit.*, 14.

¹⁰ Quoted by Pol Pelletier, *op. cit.*, 15. The passage quoted appeared in *The Drama Review* 86 (June 1980), on page 35 of the "Women and Performance" issue.

¹¹ Cf. my text "From an Esthetic of Seduction to a Theory of the 'Ob-scene,'" presented at the annual conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research in Helsinki (August 1993). To be published.

An actor who trains according to Grotowski's methods, assuming he has the necessary talent, will reach a state of purity. But in this limpid state of non-being, it is not a sense of loss that awaits him. It is more a state where he is in osmosis with the great archetypes of his civilization. These archetypes give him a sense of power, completion, legitimacy.¹²

If an actor who reaches a state of purity is faced with archetypes, what does an actress face? She faces the same archetypes, which are masculine for the most part; that is, unless new archetypes can be created. This is precisely the task adopted by contemporary feminist artistic practice.

Let's quote Pol Pelletier once again.

It's not enough to "clean out" women's bodies. We must teach their very flesh new references, new ways of seeing themselves and of relating to the outside world ... We need ... a women's culture; to pass from a symbolic universe where women are secondary creatures, there to "serve", to a new symbolic universe where women can live out their full beauty and strength.¹³

What kind of acting would allow the discovery and exploitation of this new culture? Pol Pelletier founded the actor training program "Dojo for Actors" around five years ago in order to provide training for interested actors and actresses and to attempt to answer this very question. At her training center, Pelletier works with body liberation techniques that assist the actress and the actor in truly possessing the space that surrounds her (or him) on stage. She also works on the laws of presence: that is to say the laws of imbalance, apposition, exaggeration and refusal of Stanislavskian emotion. In order to work on these aspects of acting, she has developed techniques that are inspired by the Orient, techniques based on breathing, the halting of mental activity and the actor's relationship to energy. For Pelletier, absolutely everything must come from the body.

Is there anything more sumptuous than a body? I feel a real passion for the bones, muscles, nerves, skin the whole mass of movable and transformable parts that can be put together in so many different ways. I want to see women on stage whose bodies give me a real eyeful. For that to happen, there are two things that must be discovered. First of all, the savageness of the body. In the sense of primitive liberty. And in the sense of an immense power that we all possess but that has been taken away from us ...

A second element that I want to develop is what I call the "body imagination". Once the savage state of being has been rediscovered, once we have gotten rid of our fears, we find that the body has an extraordinary inventive capacity.¹⁴

I would have to quote the whole of Pol Pelletier's article in order to truly do justice to the work of this practitioner and theorist. Even if some of her statements might seem unconvincing, even if others seem to apply to actors as well as actresses, Pelletier's theoretical text is very strong and it is entirely worthwhile to present and discuss the ideas of this feminist in conferences such as this one. The reason for this is that Pelletier's article provides a vibrant and stimulating example of what acting theory created by women can be like.¹⁵

¹² Pelletier, *op. cit.*, 15.

¹³ Pelletier, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Pelletier, *op. cit.*, 19-20.

¹⁵ Pol Pelletier also writes: When people ask my opinion on actor-training, I always tell them that if I had a theatre school, at least half of the courses in the first year would be dedicated to the history of women's present condition, in order that the new interior mythology where the actress could discover new drives to guide her acting, the symbolic universe of which I spoke earlier, might be created. There would also be a lot of physical training courses: Self-defense, martial arts, gymnastics, weight training... (in Order to bring women's bodies to a neutral position, to a state of powerful emptiness, they must be trained to obtain great strength.) There would also be an improvisation course that would allow the exploration of themes or ideas that emerge from the theoretical courses. And a course to develop creativity: playing with the imagination, conscious dreaming, writing exercises... Once again, all this is to nourish one's feeling of self-existence. Never any courses based on the interpretation of repertory plays, because the roles in these works would make us stick out our hips again, or flutter around the stage, batting our eyelids and waving our hands about. In order to change the body, we must change the mind. (*op. cit.*, 14).

In Julija Varley's text, "The Silence of the Valley of the Moon", the author recounts the following anecdote.

When I asked Eugenio Barba why women are absent from theatre history, he answered: because they have not written. When I pointed out the many actresses, autobiographies and letters, his answer changed: because they have not made theory, because they have not transformed their experience into reflections, advises and visions which become reference for future generations in the theatre.¹⁶

Barba's observations are interesting indeed, for even if more and more women are venturing into the field of theatre theory, one area of this domain, acting theory, remains relatively unexplored by women, who are just starting to brave this untamed territory. This feminine exploration would surely benefit the whole of theatre practice.

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¹⁶ Julija Varley, "The silence of the Valley of the Moon", Unpublished manuscript, 2.