

Introduction

In the summer of 2006, during Chicago's most recent heat wave, Sally Shedd (Virginia Wesleyan College), Erica Stevens Abbitt (University of Windsor), Gwendolyn Hale (Fisk University), and Johanna Frank (University of Windsor) met in a panel sponsored by the Women and Theatre Program at the twentieth annual conference of the Association of Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) to discuss the phenomenon of "performative drift" in twentieth- and twentieth-first-century plays by women.¹ The focus of this panel was particularly pertinent to the WTP conference theme of "displacements, genealogies, generations and geopolitics," for it was centered on the growing number of contemporary plays and productions that use what might be termed "the politics of haunting" to interrogate gender relations, represent the sensation of being severed or alienated from the circulation of power and the material base of society, and ponder the strategic use of "vanishing" techniques in feminist performance. In keeping with the mission of Women and Theatre Program, this focus involves an active intersection of theory and praxis, so that the presentations wove together thoughts arising from experience of directing, acting, watching, reading, and teaching contemporary plays by women that are informed by central young female figures who are absent/present—flickering in and out of sight.

Intersections of Theory and Practice

In "'There is no keyhole on my door:' Musings on Visibility and the Power of the 'Unmarked' in *The Children's Hour*," Sally Shedd draws from her own experience directing Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, in a witty examination of why iconic characters (and productions) continue to haunt the present. Her work suggests that "the unseen and unheard" not only trouble relationships between girls and women onstage, but also between generations of feminist practitioners. In "Getting Out, Flying and Returning from the Dead," Erica Stevens Abbitt looks at the cultural phenomenon of evacuated, "flickering," ghost girls, who embody supernatural powers while representing the least empowered members of family and social hierarchies. Her work examines a range of contemporary female American playwrights who use this recurring figure, from Dael Orlandersmith, and Ellen McLaughlin to Naomi Wallace. Gwendolyn Hale's study on "Absence in Naomi Wallace's *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*" deepens this exploration, focusing on the figure of the ghost girl and how it reveals the circulation of power, as well the possibility of change, in such virtuoso live enactments as a "touchless" sexual encounter between two dispossessed adolescents in the Depression-era South. Finally, Johanna Frank's "Embodied Absence and Theatrical Dismemberment"

investigates the way young female characters in Adrienne Kennedy's *A Lesson in a Dead Language* and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* actively structure presence through absence, using silence and disappearance (as well as embodiment) to interrogate race, gender, and the notion of representation itself.

Troubled sight: Open questions

Whether considering the erased references to lesbian sexuality in *The Children's Hour*, the disembodied voices in *A Lesson in a Dead Language*, corporeal displays in *Venus*, or the gap between the flickering bodies of the dead and the live, puissant bodies of actors who represent them in the plays of Naomi Wallace, these papers link performance scholarship (a form of embodiment itself) with a wide range of theoretical concerns. For decades, feminist theatre scholars have focused on the concepts of absence and (in)visibility to address a number of issues. Jill Dolan's foundational work, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, establishes the primacy of reception in the creation of meaning, focusing on the apparatus of sight in the ideology of representation and linking "resistant" spectatorship to female agency and change.² Elin Diamond's *Unmaking Mimesis* investigates the scopic economy in theatrical representation, examining ways in which playwrights such as Caryl Churchill and Adrienne Kennedy developed tactics to "trick" sight in order to resist the objectification of the body of the (female) actor and dismantle the patriarchal underpinnings of realism.³ Peggy Phelan, in her elegaic study *Unmarked*, rehearses the subversive operations of mourning, loss, and absence in feminist performance art and theatre, where motifs of disappearance and erasure reverberate.⁴ Both Elaine Aston and Sue-Ellen Case (from her early exploration of split subject to the recently published *Performing Science and the Virtual*) explore strategies of invisibility within a materialist critique, investigating ways in which techniques that trouble sight are used to reconfigure power, sexuality, and gender in performance.⁵ Haiping Yan's *Staging Modern Vagrancy: Female Figures of Border-crossing in Ama Ata Aidoo and Caryl Churchill* links absence, performance, and transnationalism in her analysis of plays that feature displaced girls and young women haunting the edges of the global economy.⁶

These theoretical considerations are not without their contestations and complexities. Feminist scholars such as Tania Modleski have sounded a warning bell about the strategy of evoking—then erasing—the figure of the empowered women in contemporary discourses, which may seem enlightened but actually serve to push the inconvenient, living, breathing, messy female body right out of the critique.⁷ Does the representation of erasure and evacuation in the theatrical arena reinscribe the violence and dismissal being perpetuated against women by the apparatus of representation? Not according to the writings contained in this supplement. The theatrical practices they chronicle were clearly intended to have

the opposite effect. Written on the bodies of some of the youngest female members of contemporary culture, the plays explored in these articles may differ in subject matter, tactics, aesthetics, and context. Taken together, however, they provide a strong investigation into what Phelan terms “active vanishing”—the deliberate, tactical use of disappearing, or troubled visibility in live performance.⁸

The writings in this supplement also raise number a range of practical considerations, which go beyond the conference, text, or classroom into the rehearsal studio and theatrical arena. How does the recurrence of absence and erasure in modern drama impact what we teach actors in training programs within the academy? What are the challenges posed by these techniques for those trained in the Method or other forms dedicated to sustaining the cult of realism?⁹ Do the motifs of absence, vanishing, and substitution link with the socio-political realities of our era (such as the war in Iraq)? If so, how do they shape the repertoire we choose in times of crisis? Do the techniques of “active vanishing” reveal a thread linking female playwrights across different eras and regions? If so, does this provide scholars with a historical and theoretical tool for deeper analysis? Making reference to a range of works from 1934 to the present, the writings offered up in this supplement travel through a series of silent, unseen, obscured, or evacuated female figures used in representation to evoke power as well as limitation—promise, as well as erasure—with the aim of opening up a dialogue on a rich and useful intersection of practice and theory

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Notes

1. The panel, entitled “A Space Shaped by Absence: Performative Drift, Women, Girls and Feminist Embodiment” was sponsored by Women and Theatre Program. Founded in 1974, WTP sponsors panels supporting feminist inquiry and the production of feminist theatre at the annual conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). The members of this panel gratefully acknowledge their support for this research.

2. Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 1991).

3. Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

4. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (London: Routledge, 1993).

5. Most notably Aston’s writings on Caryl Churchill, and *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1999). Sue-Ellen Case, “From Split Subject to Split Britches,” *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights*, ed. Enoch Brater (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 126-146; and Case, *Performing Science and the Virtual* (London: Routledge, 2006). For other writings relating to the subject of feminist embodiment, see Sharon Willis’s “Hélène Cixous’s *Portrait de Dora*: the Unseen and the Un-scene,” *Performing Feminisms*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1990) 77-91; Susan Clement and Esther Beth Sullivan’s “The Split Subject of *Blood Relations*,” *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theatre as if Gender and Race Matter*, eds. Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993) 53-66; and *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia UP, 1997).

6. Haiping Yan, “Staging Modern Vagrancy: Female Figures of Border-crossing in Ama Ata Aidoo and Caryl Churchill,” *Theatre Journal* 53 (2002): 245-62.

7. See Tania Modleski's *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991). Modleski links feminist theory with popular culture (mostly films), questioning late-twentieth-century texts that, "in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism—in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world." (3)

8. Phelan 19.

9. For more discussion on the challenge of developing new tactics for actors trained in realist techniques, see Aston 120-21.