

URINALS, SWORDFIGHTS, AND DILDOS:  
EXPERIMENTING WITH MASCULINE GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN AN  
ADAPTATION OF JOE CALARCO'S ADAPTATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S  
*ROMEO & JULIET*

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## Chapter One: The Question

In a culture in which, according to the American Library Association, a children's book about the true story of two male penguins raising a chick is the most controversial children's book for five years in a row (ALA), in which elected officials compare the "dangers of the homosexual lifestyle" to the health risks associated with second-hand smoke (qtd. in Keyes), and some private universities in the US are threatening their students with expulsion because of their homosexual behavior ("H.U. Queer Press"), it should come as little surprise that a young, moderately intelligent man with homosexual desires growing up in America today would have difficulty understanding his personal gender and sexual identity.

When it came time to choose a project for my thesis, I knew that I wanted to explore the conundrums I faced on my way out of the closet. I found an excellent platform for such an exploration in Joe Calarco's adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, entitled *Shakespeare's R&J*. The adaptation centers on four Catholic schoolboys as they perform Shakespeare's play. The main source of tension in the play arises from the parallels that emerge between the forbidden love of Romeo and Juliet and the romance that develops between the two male students who play the iconic characters. The productions of the play occurred on February 27, 28, and March 1, 2011 in the basement of Clippinger Laboratories at Ohio University. Reaching the point of production, however, was an intricate and challenging process, as this thesis will describe in detail.

I secured the help of Dr. Jordan Schildcrout, head of the Theater Criticism

Program at Ohio University, to guide me through the research portion on the project. Professor Rebecca Vernooy, my movement professor, with whom I had already worked with on several projects, agreed to advise the rehearsal process. Sarah Stevens, a senior women's and gender studies and theatre major and close friend, helped me comprehend the research, and helped me communicate these ideas to the cast; I called her my "gender consultant." In the spring, Dr. William Condee supervised the writing of this thesis.

I did not want this production to be a platform to simply decry and warn against the evils of homophobia, nor did I want to tell a standard gay *Bildungsroman* in which the closeted main character finally finds the strength to leave the closet after a romantic encounter with another queer boy. Though there is merit in such projects, I wanted to use this project as an opportunity to better understand the complex relationship between masculinity and homosexuality in this country. I wanted to see what would happen when male homosexuality interacts with normative western ideas and narratives regarding masculinity in order to better understand homosexuality and masculinity, both of which have been influential in my life.

I determined that to accomplish this exploration within a theatrical context, I could not approach this project the way I would have approached a standard production. Most theatrical productions subscribe to the "cultural mindset that interprets artwork as a final product" (Dunderjerovic 27). With this production, however, I wanted to evoke the work of director and theatrical theorist Robert Lepage, who thought of theatre more as a "process of becoming, where in fact no one knows

the final destination or how to get there” (Dunderjerovic 27). Such theatre allows “directors to emphasize imagery, both physical and visual, and personal experiences over language, local milieu, and... socio-political circumstances” (Dunderjerovic 28). In other words, I wanted to experiment.

I wanted to emphasize to the audience that this project was an experiment in gender and sexual performance rather than a conventional play, so I decided to set the performance in a non-conventional theatrical space, specifically, a science laboratory. I hoped that by setting the performance in an unconventional space, I would be reminding the audience that this performance was meant to evoke what Aleksandar Dundkerovic calls Lepage’s “raw, adaptable, unstructured, loose, actor-centered performances that adapt and transform a narrative to accommodate various audiences and circumstances” (Dundjerovic 25). I hoped to emphasize that both the performers and the schoolboys they portray are experimenting with issues of gender and sexuality in an attempt to discover something about themselves and their identity. The sterile and bleak laboratory setting would serve to restrict the actors and the schoolboys in similar ways to the de-individualizing processes of social pressures and expectations. The space would be as cold and unsympathetic as the forces the four schoolboys must overcome in order to look deeply and truthfully at their desires, their behavior, and ultimately, their identity.

The use of a laboratory as a theatrical space to achieve the above goals is reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. Brecht, a German theatrical theorist and playwright of the mid-twentieth century, believed fervently that the social,

political, and economic struggles of contemporary humans could and should be the subject of the theatre, whether the play is modern or classical (Brecht, *Theatre of Learning* 26). According to Brecht, the “V-effect”

consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware ... from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected.... Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. (“On Theatre” 143-44)

By forcing the audience to perceive objects and situations that may have previously taken for granted in a new way, Brecht hoped to show the audience that the conditions in which they and the characters in the play exist have the potential to change. By using a space that the audience would associate with science, rather than theatre, I hoped they would associate the performance with the typically analytic and objective pursuit of science, as opposed to the emotional and subjective connotation of the theatre. In doing so, the audience might think more critically about how the four schoolboys function in and around the world of *Romeo and Juliet*, and thus pay closer attention to how the constructs of gender and sexuality are – to borrow a chemistry term – reacting with each other and the script.

I approached this entire project as if it were an experiment. It seemed only logical, therefore, to structure this thesis around the scientific method as well. In the scientific method, there are six steps to the pursuit of knowledge. To begin, a question must be asked. Then research is done in fields that pertain to the question. Afterwards, a hypothesis, or a possible outcome, is postulated, followed by an experiment that tests the validity of the hypothesis. An experiment consists of three kinds of variables. The

independent variables are the conditions in the experiment that are being changed or altered; the control variable is the condition that remains the same as other properties of the experiment are changed and adapted; and the dependent variable is the aspect of the experiment that changes as a result of the independent and control variables. In my experimental production, the independent variables consist of elements such as the gender of the actors playing Shakespeare's characters, the setting of the production in an unconventional space, etc. while the control variable is Shakespeare's characters, story, and script, which both Calarco and I adapted to suit our needs. The dependent variable is the audience's reaction to and perception of gender and sexuality as a result of watching the performance. If the hypothesis is proven viable by the experiment, then a conclusion can be drawn. If not, a new hypothesis must be created, and a new experiment must be performed in order to test it until a provable hypothesis is reached.

Using the scientific method as a structure for writing about an artistic production, even an experimental one, is imperfect. For instance, my personal journey through and out of the closet did not seem to have a place in the objective nature of the background research necessitated by the scientific method. I have therefore re-appropriated the "transgendered writing style" of transgender theorist and performer Kate Bornstein who believes that her writing style is like her identity: "based on collage" (Bornstein 3). I have indicated when I feel that my personal narrative in dealing with issues of gender and sexuality is relevant to the narrative of my exploration of these themes in *Romeo and Juliet* by italicizing the text, "sort of a cut-and-paste thing" (Bornstein 3). My artistic process, however, was one of constant

testing and revision. The form of posing a hypothesis and creating a new one when the previous hypothesis failed is therefore conducive with the chronology of my process and journey as I attempted to dramatize what I have learned about my and other's gender and sexuality over the years.

Inspired by the scientific method, this thesis is divided into six chapters. “The Question” introduces my project. “The Research” consists of both the theoretical research I did in preparation for writing this thesis, as well as my own personal experiences growing up in the closet, and how these experiences have informed my understandings of gender and sexuality. “The Experiments,” numbers one, two, and three, describe the three hypotheses I tested over the course of the production, as well as the variables associated with each experiment. Finally “The Conclusion” describes the conclusions I reached as a result of spending a year using the theatre to experiment with issues of gender and sexual identity. To begin, therefore, I must ask a question: How does a young gay man growing up in twenty-first century America come to terms with his identity in a culture dominated by compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexual narratives?



## Chapter Two: The Research

In the preface of her book *Gender Trouble*, renowned gender and identity theorist Judith Butler poses the following rhetorical questions, which I believe effectively summarize the theoretical groundwork from which my production evolved:

How does language itself produce the fictive construction of “sex” that supports [compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism]?...Within a language of presumptive heterosexuality, what sorts of continuities are assumed to exist among sex, gender, and desire?... What kinds of cultural practices produce subversive discontinuity and dissonance among sex, gender, and desire and call into question their alleged relations? (xi)

According to Butler, language functions as the unconscious and self-naturalizing “epistemic/ontological regime” on which our society enforces its rules and assumptions about gender and sexuality (x). She also sets up the idea of “sex,” here used intentionally generally to imply both gender and sexuality, as being a “fictive construction,” meaning that gender and sexual orientation are created by a society, and then falsely presumed to be natural. Two presumptions in particular are especially dangerous for Butler: compulsory heterosexuality, or the cultural obligation to participate in heterosexual and reproductive sexuality; and phallogocentrism, or the supremacy of the male signifier (the phallus) in political, social, and theoretical gender discourse. Because gender and sexuality are constructed by a society, it is therefore possible to deconstruct them as well. Butler asks what in a culture subverts presumptions about “sex, gender, and desire” (xi), thus deconstructing these presumptions by calling into question the naturalness of a societies assumptions about the ways in which constructs like gender and sexuality relate and are related to one another.

I came to understand the reason I had so much difficulty with gender and sexual identity. These constructions need to be deconstructed, because both gender and sexual orientation are binaries, and, like all binaries, both sides are not created equal. Gender and sexual orientation function as class systems, in which one pole oppresses and subverts the will of the other (Bornstein 106). Cheshire Calhoun, a feminist theorist, describes the three stipulations for oppression of a social minority: “Oppression depends on cultural articulation of basic historical social identities that are taken to be: a) immutable features of a person b) determinative of psychological, moral, intellectual physical capabilities c) in polar opposition to the other [dominant] identity” (5). In order to end the oppression, therefore, divisions between the poles of a binary must be shown to be mutable and changeable, rather than natural. The divisions between the poles must be shown to have no bearing on psychological, moral, intellectual, and/or physical capabilities. Most important, liberators must demonstrate that the poles are not polar at all, but separated only by the two groups’ acceptance of the notion that they are separate. In short, “the idea of gender itself must go away before there can be gender equality” (Bornstein 114). This is easier said than done, however, because class systems like gender create privilege for the oppressing class. Because the benefits of privilege produce vested interest in preserving the system, dismantling the system is difficult (Calhoun 5).

Deconstructing gender and sexual orientation are also difficult because both constructs have become integral to an individual's identity in this culture. Anything that undermines confidence in the classifications on which people base their lives

sickens them, because it threatens their whole cognitive system (Bornstein 72). It is also, therefore, imperative to understand how one comes to identify as a particular subgroup, in order to facilitate the deconstruction of the identity-structure with which the individual has identified. An individual's identity has two sides: one that looks inward at what the individual hopes and desires, and the other that looks outward at how the external world perceives the individual. An individual's perception of his or her identity, or ego, is the result of combining these two identifying processes (Kahn 3). In order to bring about the end of gender and sexual orientation, and thus to bring about equality, both processes, the individualizing and minoritizing inward process and the universalizing outward process, must be addressed, explored, and deconstructed.

The first scholar to explicitly theorize that gender is a social construct, rather than a naturally occurring state of existence was likely Gayle Rubin in 1975 (Vance 38). As Butler explains, "gender is the cultural meanings the sexed body assumes" (6), meaning that gender, or what we understand as male and female, is a collection of assumptions and expectations that a culture makes about a body or individual based on what a society perceives the individuals sex to be. Similarly, Eve Sedgwick, a notable queer theorist, argues that, gender is the cultural implications of biological sex (*Epistemology of the Closet* 27). But then what is sex? Bornstein argues that sexual assignment "is phallogentric and genital" (22), meaning that what determines one's biological sex -- at least as far as society at large is concerned -- is the penis. One is a man because one has a penis; one is a woman because one does not have a penis,

hence the presence or absence of a penis is considered the “primary” gender signifier (Bornstein 26, 56). Other biological signifiers of sex in western discourse include secondary gender signifiers (such as breasts for women), hormone levels, and chromosomal composition (Bornstein 56).

Bornstein argues that there exists in western cultural a “false supremacy” of biological gender or sex (30). Butler argues that “the distinction between gender and sex is not a distinction at all” (7). By separating gender and sex into two distinct categories, where one is a socially constructed cultural identity and the other is a biological fact, it must be assumed that there is something essential and immutable about the difference between men and women. Butler, and especially Bornstein, point out, however, that this assumption is ludicrous, because biological gender can be as inconstant as its supposed cultural counterpart.

Sexual androgyny exists in a higher percentage of the human population than might be expected. For instance, there are many who live with both male and female genitalia. Likewise, Bornstein is living proof that science has given many the ability to choose their genitalia (Bornstein 56). Genitalia, therefore, cannot be an essential gender determinant because it is something that is either inconstant from person to person, or, given the right resources, can be changed. Some may counter that it is the reproductive function of the genitalia, rather than simply the presence of gender-specific genitals, that is a determinant. Bornstein argues that “many women are born without this [reproductive] potential, and every woman ceases to possess that capability after menopause... what if your sperm count is low... are you then a

woman?” (56-57).

Bornstein elaborates on the impossibility of an essential biological gender, or sex, by asking the question: How else might we determine sex, if not by genitalia? Are hormones a way to tell whether someone is biologically male or female? Unfortunately this does not work for the same reasons as using genitalia as a determinate. Because levels of testosterone and estrogen vary widely among people, and because there are far too many men with high estrogen and women with high testosterone, “the universal key to gender is not hormones” (56). Bornstein also takes hormone-therapy as part of her transformation into a woman, further negating the argument that hormone levels are immutable or essential. Perhaps genetics, the great natural determinate, can help sort out who is man and who is woman. Again, Bornstein points out that if genetics are a gender determinant, individuals with XXY, XXX, YYY, XYY, and XO chromosomes are neither male nor female, meaning “there are more than two genders” (56). Bornstein argues that to use the term “sex” insinuates the false assumption that there is something scientifically essential to the distinction between male and female (30). Therefore, she argues that “Sex is fucking, gender is everything else” (116).

*Unlike many in my position who “always knew I was different” (“I’m From Driftwood”), I felt extremely normal growing up. I was always very short and was raised Jewish, both of which sometimes set me apart, but that I liked playing with Barbie dolls, dressing up in my mom’s old dresses and jewelry, or pretending to be a girl while cuddling with a male friend of mine in dark corners of our homes never*

*struck me as queer, in any sense of the word. Granted, I did somehow know not to share such behavior with the world at large (to this day almost no one knows about me cuddling with my friend... I guess until now), but I never felt as though this behavior was unusual or morally compromising, at least at the time.*

Butler argues that gender is a verb, not a noun (25). Gender is something that one *does*, a series of postures and gestures (Solomon 34), rather than something someone *is*. In this way, gender becomes performative, where hegemonic ideals about the ways in which different people ought to behave become naturalized and mandated. Similar to Plato's world of Ideals, I began to see male and female as intangible idealizations of how humans should behave. One cannot be male or female; rather, one strives to become male or female one's entire life through the performance of culturally sanctioned postures and gestures.

There are ample anthropological examples to support this claim. Though nearly every culture prescribes individuals a gender at birth, full realization of that gender "is trans-culturally something to be acquired or earned" (Bhabha 72). The Jewish faith mandates a Bar Mitzvah, a ceremony wherein a young boy studies the Torah in preparation for being accepted into the community as an adult man. In contemporary America, one often hears the saying "becoming a man" when describing a young boy's first sexual encounter or some other milestone of experience. In all of these cases, and infinitely more just like them, we see that a man is not born, but made, by putting the boy through a gauntlet or test (Garber 93).

There are, therefore, "as many experiences of gender as there are people who

think they have a gender” (Bornstein 8), which means that “there is no reason to assume genders remain as two” (Butler 6). One cannot ever truly be a man or a woman, because everyone's performance of gender is slightly different: We all negotiate the various assumptions and expectations of gender differently. There is empirical evidence to support such ideas. Sarah Bem, a sociologist, ran an experiment in which people were asked to describe themselves with a list of adjectives. They were then given a separate list of adjectives and asked to sort the words into two categories: masculine and feminine. The experiment found that scoring high “masculine” traits did not predict low “feminine” traits, and vice versa. This experiment is evidence not only that one cannot be truly masculine or feminine, but also that masculine and feminine are not polar, but independently variable constructs that often overlap and contradict each other (Sedgwick, “Gosh Boy George” 15-16). Indeed when one uses the word masculine or feminine as a descriptive term, one is not merely referring to biological gender, one is conflating an entire matrix of binary traits into the terms male and female. When one is “male” there is typically an assumption that one is also top/dominant/sadist as opposed to female/bottom/submissive/masochist (Bornstein 34).

That gender is not the strict binary western culture understands it to be does not mean that gender is not “real” or “authentic.” Instead “culture consolidates and augments the hegemony of gender through self-naturalization” (Butler 32). Gender certainly exists in our society. The point of arguments like those of Butler and Bornstein is not to deny the existence of gender, but rather to make the case that a

person's gender is not a concrete and natural fact, but the result of a cultural expectation to perform specific behaviors based on hegemonic ideals that are often conflicting and impossible to fully achieve. Therefore, just because the construct of gender *does* exist does not mean it *must* exist.

Bornstein attempts to explain why cultures began enforcing gender roles when she writes that gender is a system, while reproductive sex is its function (31). Gender, by this definition, is a process whose purpose is sex, or more specifically, sexual reproduction. Butler would agree with this basic idea, however she would not approve of the phrasing of the definition, because it still implies that sexual reproduction originates out of gender. According to Butler, reproductive sexuality proceeded gender (23).

In sexual reproduction, two complementary gametes (typically a sperm and an egg) are needed in order to create the next generation. The same individual, however, rarely carries both complementary gametes. Angus John Bateman, an influential geneticist, theorized that all differences between males and females in a species emerge from the difference in energy required to produce and distribute their respective gamete, however his theory has been largely disproven because there are simply too many exceptions to his theory for it to be considered a rule (Dewsbury). Though many in the scientific community now disregard Bateman's Principle, it does hold some bearing on human interaction.

Even though Bornstein's definition of gender is not incorrect, a better way to look at it is that gender emerged out of the politics of power surrounding the binary



nature of sexual reproduction. Accordingly Butler postulates that “male” and “female” only exist in the heterosexual matrix, a system in which reproduction is the end goal of sexual relations (111).

*During my middle school years, I began looking at pornographic material. Though it had started with Victoria's Secret catalogues, somehow (and truthfully I do not know exactly when or how it happened) by high school, I had begun clicking on the “gay” button in online porn clip databases. I did not think anything of this, however. I knew not to tell anyone about it, but I never considered that the behavior might somehow reflect something deeper or essential about me. I had a girlfriend for a time, and continued to have crushes on girls in my classes. I remember the exact moment I first questioned my sexuality: a choir trip my freshman year of high school.*

*On the choir trip, I met a boy from another school who was very nice to me, and we quickly became friends. Given my insecurities about my body at that time, I was only flattered when a mutual friend of ours informed me, “You know he’s gay right? He likes you!” I think I was aware that he was and that he was flirting with me. It was not, however, immediately apparent to me that this information was at all significant. It was not until the bus ride home that I started to make connections. He liked boys, and was gay. I liked watching naked boys, so... was I gay too? The implications were horrifying, and in many ways too far-reaching for me to fully comprehend at the time.*

The reproductive nature of gender complicates contemporary assumptions about gender because not all individuals in our culture participate in reproductive sex.

Butler clarifies the origins of gender by agreeing with Rubin that “gender is merely a function of compulsory heterosexuality, and... without that compulsory status, the field of bodies would no longer be marked in gendered terms” (75). Homosexuality, then, disrupts the gender binary by ignoring the power relations that emerge out of compulsory reproductive sexuality (Butler 26). Indeed Michel Foucault, an influential philosopher and historian, believed that the perceived danger of homosexuality has less to do with sodomy and more to do with gender ambiguity (43). The real problem with homosexuality is not that homosexual behavior is immoral or unnatural, but rather that it threatens a complex power structure that has existed since prehistory, whereby one group (men) have come to dominate another group (women) through justifications based on the differences in each group's role in sexual reproduction. By pulling one's self out of the matrix of sexual reproduction, one no longer needs to abide by the rules that emanate from that matrix (i.e. gender), thereby proving that emancipation from the power structure of gender is possible.

This potential for emancipation requires that someone remove himself or herself fully from the reproductive system of compulsory heterosexuality. Homosexual behavior has existed as long as heterosexual behavior has existed, perhaps most famously with the ancient Greeks (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 4), though abstaining completely from reproductive sex in favor of exclusive homosexual behavior is a recent development. The “Molly Houses” of Early Modern England were the first known communities of individuals who participated in or preferred homosexual behavior (in this case, men) began to form (Jagose 12). It was not until

the turn of the twentieth century that the term “homosexual,” at least as a way of describing a distinct group of people, entered public lexicon (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 2). Alan Sinfield argues that “the [gay] man as we know him is a consequence of the [trials of Oscar Wilde in the late nineteenth century]” (32). According to Sinfield, it was during the trials that “the entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism, which Wilde was perceived as instantiating, was transformed into a brilliantly precise image: the [homosexual man]” (28).

The term “heterosexual” soon followed, and a *new* binary identity-structure, what we call “sexual orientation,” soon followed. As Sedgwick explain:

every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable to a homo- or hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal experience (*Epistemology* 2)

As Foucault wrote, “The Homosexual is now a species” (43).

*The next year the same choirboy transferred to my school. While walking down the hall with him one day we were passed by two older male students who shouted at him (and me because I was with him) “fag” as they walked by. The hate and danger in their voices is something I will never forget. To this day, I do not know whether I was more afraid that they would try to harm me for thinking I was gay, or that they might be right in thinking so. I did not want either to be the case, so I quickly rationalized my way out of a precarious psychological position. I convinced myself that I was not gay. Rather I was jealous of the physique of these handsome men. My interest in them was not sexual as much as the result of a desire to look like*

*them. The power of denial is truly profound, because I managed to maintain this rationale for some time.*

*As I matured I eventually came to the conclusion that mere envy could not explain my attraction to attractive men. Like Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief, I abandoned denial and began to bargain. I began making all kinds of agreements with myself and with God, anyone that I thought might be able to help me with my potentially catastrophic problem. One rule I made for myself was that I was not to have homosexual thoughts while inside the walls of my school. There were days when I would be thinking about a hot classmate on my way to school and would force myself to think about something else as I walked through the doorway of the building. I made more resolutions than I can count: New Year's resolutions, Jewish New Year's resolutions, Spring Equinox resolutions, birthday resolutions, I-had-a-weird-conversation-with-my-mother-today resolutions, etc. Some I made to God, and some just to myself. I would vow that from that point on, I would stop fantasizing about men. I was straight, or at least I wanted to be with every fiber of my being (except of course for the couple that kept perking up every time I watched a movie where Brad Pitt took his shirt off). If it is not obvious from the number of resolutions I made, none of these promises were successful.*

*After bargaining failed, I entered the stages of anger and depression simultaneously. I remained in this stage through the latter half of high school and the early portion of my college years. I was depressed during this period because of the stress of graduating from high school and not getting into my first choice of colleges.*

*In retrospect, however, it is clear that hiding in the closet was a major reason for my general unhappiness. I had come to the conclusion that I was not straight, which in and of itself was terrifying. I told myself, however, that I was not gay, but bisexual, and that being bisexual did not necessitate sacrificing the storybook romance I always wanted, nor did it require me to tell anyone about the dark side of my desires: after all, it might just be a phase.*

*Cognitive dissonance always arises when one lies to a person face to face. Half of the mind thinks that, for whatever reason, the lie is the best or safest option available, but the other half balks at having to suppress the truth. This internal conflict is very similar to the closet, except that the sensation of the mind being split in two is a constant. No matter whom I talked to, or what we talked about, there were always several moments where I would have to stop myself from saying or doing something incriminating. Keeping my secret became a full-time and exhausting job for me, but I preferred the exhaustion to the moments of panic when I feared I had been found out.*

*For those who do not understand this feeling, I like to use the example of writing left-handed. I am left-handed, and have always hated writing with pencils because as I move my hand from left to right across the page as I write, my left hand turns silver from the lead of the pencil. Right-handed people always get a kick out of hearing my hatred of pencils, because writing was always clean and easy for them. It never even occurs to them that the simple act of writing can be so different for someone else just because he or she uses a different hand. The same is true of living*

*in the closet. It is hard to appreciate how tailored the world is to being heterosexual unless one is not heterosexual, and as a result, unable to fully relate to those around him or her. Watching movies was always stressful, because I would always find myself looking at the male leads, but would have to report on which female leads I found attractive when my friends, family, and I discussed the movie later. Even classes like history and biology could become awkward if issues of reproduction came up, because it was a possibility that I might not have children of my own. These anxieties (on top of all the other typical stresses of adolescence) make for a very, very confusing and emotionally tumultuous time.*

*I did not want to come out just because I did not want to be gay and assume all the baggage associated with that identity. I did not want to come out because I was afraid that, by declaring myself as gay, I would be forever swearing off romantic relations with women. I had begun my sexual career with the lovely ladies of Victoria's Secret, and at the end of my senior year, I had a brief but completely authentic relationship with a young woman in my class. If I were to declare myself as gay, I worried that people, including and especially my family, would assume I was a purse-toting, lip-gloss-and-pink-lace-wearing fairy princess. That was not something I wanted to be perceived as, because that is not something I was. As a side note, I have since come to realize that there is nothing wrong with gay men who act femininely in this way. At the time, I was rather homophobic because I was still afraid of my feelings and myself. I now rather enjoy nice lip-gloss from time to time, and have become an admirer of purses, though I still do not own one myself. To put it*

*simply, I feared that by declaring myself as gay, I would have to sacrifice my masculinity.*

Calhoun observes that “homosexuality is culturally read as a failure to be a 'real' man or woman” (18). There exists a prevalent fear among gay men of being coded as “effeminate, or worse, a woman” (Garber 137). This fear is not, however, unique to gay men. Richard Friedman argues that male self-worth, regardless of sexuality, is dependent on “masculine self-regard” (19).

The crisis of masculine self-regard can be seen in the legal history of the “homosexual panic” criminal defense strategy. “Homosexual panic” as a criminal defense strategy has been used in cases where a “straight” man claims that an attack on a “gay” man, or a man he perceived to be flirting with him, was a form of self-defense, specifically a defense of his masculinity. This defense implies that the assailant was insecure in his sexuality/masculinity (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 20). Bornstein elaborates on the implications of a straight man's masculine insecurity when approached by a gay man by saying that “his revulsion can be seen not as a sign of his being revolted, but as an admission of his desire” (75). The violence is not a reaction to the sexuality of the victim, but a reaction against what the assailant perceives to be a lapse in his own masculinity. According to Sedgwick, the success of this defense on multiple occasions implies also that most men are insecure about their sexuality/masculinity. Moreover, the defense of this insecure masculinity is so profoundly essential to a man's wellbeing that a man may be excused of “diminished moral responsibility” if it is threatened (*Epistemology* 20). If homophobia among men

is actually the result of men's fear of being perceived as feminine or a woman, we can also draw the conclusion that "homophobia by men toward men is misogynistic" (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 20).

*When I got to college, I began telling people that I was bisexual when they inevitably asked whether I was straight or gay. Most people, myself included, had a hard time believing this. On one occasion, a group of fellow freshmen were waiting for class to start. They began playing the "whose team are you on" game, where people declare themselves as gay, straight, or "bat for both teams," meaning bisexual. I was sitting apart from the group of students playing this game, so rather than ask which "team" I play for, one openly gay student looked at me, then at another flamboyantly gay student, and pantomimed the opening of a door while making squeaking sounds while laughing with a little too much air of superiority. The charade was supposed to imply that I needed to come out of the closet. I was both offended and mortified.*

*I wondered at my peer's arrogance in assuming I was still in the closet simply because I was not as outspoken as he was, or because I did not carry around a purse, which his friend was notorious for carrying around. Though I had not yet openly announced to the world I was gay, I readily admitted to anyone who asked that I was not straight. I felt pressured to make a decision about something that I did not think required any decision making. I wanted to be attracted to someone, and have a relationship with that person. If it was a woman, so be it. If it was a man, I was becoming more comfortable with the idea every day. I saw the declaration of my*



*sexuality as a restrictive oversimplification of a very complex and free-flowing amalgamation of desires I had only just begun to understand.*

Even the ways in which society distinguishes homosexuals from the rest of the population demonstrates the fluctuating nature of the cultural perceptions and understandings of sexual orientation. Red neckties in the 1990's were a symbol of masculinity and power for politicians, anchormen, lawyers, and other influential figures in the public eye. In the early twentieth century, however, red proclaimed homosexuality, as wearing a red tie was a way homosexual men recognized one another (Garber 2). If signifiers of an identity (in this case homosexuality) are so unstable, even contradictory, the identity being signified must likewise implicitly be in constant flux, and therefore unstable.

Even though prior to the turn of the twentieth century western societies had no concept of sexual identity or orientation, and despite the inconsistent nature of signifiers of orientation, the “institutionalized taxonomic discourses -- medical, legal, literary, psychological – centering on homo/heterosexual definition proliferated and crystalized... around the turn of the century” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 2), and have remained fairly constant since. It was not until the mid-1990's that Jeffery Weeks would make the distinction between sexual behavior from sexual identity (Vance 40). After roughly a century of cultural amnesia in which the relationship between sexual activity and the way one identifies one's self became conflated, western society is only just beginning to understand that sexual behavior does not necessitate identity.

The separation of behavior and identity, logical as it may be, carries serious

implications regarding gay identity and the gay community. Chief among these is that if homosexual behavior does not categorically imply sexual identity, then to identify as “gay” is a choice (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 27). This does not mean that homosexual desire is a choice. Rather the choice lies in whether an individual accepts that homosexual desire is integral to her or his identity, both personal and public. Like gender, homosexual identity is performative: “I’m out, therefore I am” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 4). It is not simply the decision to perform homosexual identity that makes one gay, however, because “to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identifying *with*” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 61). This means that in order to identify as homosexual, one must also identify with other people who have identified themselves as homosexual.

In the early stages of the Gay Rights Movement, which began in 1969 with the Stonewall Riots, the goal was to break down restrictive ideas about sexuality and embrace a more universalizing view of sexuality that allowed people to behave according to their desires, regardless of how one identified. As the movement changed from opposition to assimilation, however, the movement became more about protecting the rights of a specific minority: those with a gay identity. The result is that a universalizing movement with the “potential [for liberation] for all” became a minoritizing crusade for a few, distinct communities (Jagose 59-61). Gay identity, similar to the movement that represents it, has itself become problematic in the way that those who identify as gay make themselves out to be a distinct minority. Like the heterosexual majority, many in the gay community accept that if one has homosexual

desires or participates in homosexual behavior, one is a homosexual, or gay. From the notion that one's sexual behavior is essential to one's identity comes the idea that this sexual identity is significant to aspects of one's life outside the realm of sex.

The term “queer” has become a reaction against the confining term “gay” (Jagose 76). Queer is becoming a term to describe individuals who do not participate in normative gender identities or heterosexual orientations, but do not necessarily identify with the minoritizing mentality of the gay identity. The queer identity attempts to return to the universalizing origins of the Gay Rights Movement, making it possible for someone to identify as queer and gay at the same time, “depending on one's goals” (Jagose 126). One of the goals of the queer movement is to eliminate “the stigma of being gay [which emerged] from a century of constructing the identities of 'homosexuals' as types of persons whose deviances are not limited to sexual object choice” (Calhoun 1).

The relationship between sexual orientation and “object choice,” or the gender of the object of one’s sexual and romantic desires, has been a curious issue for many theorists: “Of the many dimensions of genital activity one can be differentiated from, gender of sexual object determines sexual orientation” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 8). But as Bornstein points out, “there is more to [the act of] sex than gender” (35). Factors such as age, race, class, hair, fetishes, size, use of props and toys, bondage, and pain all factor into our decisions and experiences of sexual desire.

*In the end, I decided that life would just be easier if I caved to society's need for me to label myself as something, so that they could better digest and understand*

*me. I realized that, on some level, my insistence on my attraction to women was a vestigial appendage of a life I once wanted, and not the result of a desire I had to make a life with a woman. If I met a woman to whom I was attracted, there would be nothing to stop me from pursuing a relationship with her, least of all a label like “gay.” Over the course of my junior year of college, I came out of the closet as gay to my immediate family. While this was tumultuous at times, I can say with absolutely no reservations that after coming out, I am more confident and happy than I have ever been since first questioning my sexuality.*

The issue of gender identity in homophobia clearly indicates a subtle and complex relationship between gender and sexuality. Therefore the idea of gender must be made “permanently problematic” in order to dismantle the structures of gender and sexual orientation (Butler 128), for both binaries justify and propagate each other. Bornstein believes that true gender freedom begins with fun and play (87). Marjorie Garber believes that “cross-dressing is a necessary critique on binary thinking” (10), because the act of cross-dressing demonstrates that the essential nature of gender is a social construct (12). One's “submission to dress codes signifies your acceptance of your position in the hierarchy” (Garber 22). Therefore to reject the dress code of one's gender is to reject other roles and restrictions placed on an individual as a result of her or his gender identity.

Both transvestitism (transition in gender through dress, behavior, and other secondary signifiers of gender) and transsexuality (transition in gender through physical alteration to the genitalia and other primary signifiers of gender, as well as

through secondary gender signifiers) show that movement and play between genders and sexual orientations is possible. While gender divisions are vigorously defended throughout time and across cultures, there is also a popular fascination with gender ambiguity throughout time and across cultures (Bornstein 11). Though a culture may disapprove of such behavior, the sense of freedom and fun that comes with gender ambiguity or transitioning is no less intriguing.

When thinking about such practices, there is a “consistent desire to look at the transvestite as male or female performance” rather than as a disruption of the aforementioned binary (Garber 10). This tendency “to look through, rather than at the cross-dresser” denies the true nature of the gender play, and my production of *R&J*’s potential for change (Garber 9). It is not the man becoming a woman, or a woman becoming a man that is attractive, but the act of transitioning itself (Garber 8). The transvestite or transsexual becomes a third sex, “a sex apart, which has yet no name” (Garber 11). This third, or other, is what really fascinates people. In a world of binaries, “the third is a mode of articulation, describing a space of possibility” (Garber 11).

Rather than fully condone the gender play that so fascinates a culture, societies allow the play to continue by calling attention to the performative nature of the gender transition. Theatre is the performance of identity that is acknowledged as performance (Bornstein 147). Actors may break many of a culture’s most sacred customs because actors are by definition pretending to be something they are obviously not. In Medieval and Renaissance England, where the breaking of sumptuary laws was a very

serious offense, “actors were allowed to break sumptuary laws on the safe space of the stage” (Garber 35). The stage is a safe space because it is not real, the audience is asked to accept (briefly) the conventions of the world, not to believe them (Solomon 37). Theatre, then, is the perfect arena for exploring and deconstructing the fiercely protected naturalism of gender and sexuality.

### Chapter Three: The First Experiment

Hypothesis #1: If I cast four men to play all seventeen parts in *Romeo and Juliet*, then the lines between homosocial and homosexual bonding will be blurred, if not deconstructed altogether.

The first time I read Calarco's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, I knew that it had the potential to facilitate my exploration of my questions and problems regarding masculine gender and sexual orientation. In Calarco's adaptation, four boys in an all-boys Catholic school find and begin to perform *Romeo and Juliet*. Student #1 is slated to play Romeo, Student #2 Benvolio and Juliet, Student #3 Mercutio, Lady Capulet, and Friar Laurence, and Student #4 Tybalt, and the Nurse (as I adapted and cut Calarco's script, I also gave Student #4 the parts of Lord Capulet and the Apothecary).

Calarco split the Prince and Lord Capulet's lines up in a choral-like way among all the students. I believe his reasoning was to use those who wield power in Shakespeare's play to represent the plural forces of culture, family, politics, science, etc., that restrict free gender and sexual expression in the world outside the play. Pressure to repress homosexual desire comes from a seemingly infinite number of directions, through a multitude of cultural and societal mediums. Because all the students speak the lines of Lord Capulet and the Prince, repressive forces likewise come at the students from multiple directions. I liked this method of dramatizing the numerous repressive forces of a society, so I kept the choral convention for the Prince's lines. I felt, however, that Lord Capulet's disowning of Juliet would be more powerful if only one actor played him, thereby more closely resembling an actual parent disowning their child because of the child's homosexual desires.

Calarco frames Shakespeare's text within an all-boys school by beginning the play with Student #1 reading Shakespeare's Sonnet 147, which ends, "For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night," followed by a reading of the Act of Contrition, a Catholic prayer that begs God for forgiveness for sins committed. The juxtaposition of the two well-known pieces sets up the major source of tension on which the rest of the play rides. The struggles of the lovers in Shakespeare's play mirrors the cognitive dissonance that all four schoolboys (not just the two playing Romeo and Juliet) feel between their opposing desires for one another -- whether they are homosexual, homosocial, or both in nature -- and the desire to conform to social pressures of compulsory heterosexuality.

In Calarco's adaptation, a bell rings, and the four students begin reading from some sort of textbook that discusses the differences in the roles of the male and female sexes. This scene foreshadows the mixing-up of gender roles that occurs when the boys begin to play female characters as they act out *Romeo and Juliet*. After the convention of the four schoolboys is set up, and the play is contextualized within the realm of issues of gender and sexuality, Student #1 finds a script of *Romeo and Juliet* and convinces the other students to act it out with him. All are happy and having fun until it comes time for Romeo and Juliet to meet for the first time and begin their ill-fated romance. The tension created by the budding romance of the "star-crossed lovers" (1.1) in Shakespeare's text mirrors the tension created on stage when both the audience and the boys become disoriented by two men playing the archetypical heterosexual couple. As events in the original play further polarize the Montague and



Capulet families, even as the lovers grow closer, the four classmates must to come to terms with their sexualities and preconceived notions of one another's status, power, and masculinity. At the end of the play, when Romeo and Juliet "do with their death / bury their parents' strife" (1.1), the four students reach a new understanding and mutual respect for each other and the choices they have made.

### Control Variable

The most exciting aspect of the show for me was the exploration of Shakespeare's text, *the* quintessential heterosexual love story, through the lens of a young gay man in the contemporary United States. But, in keeping with Lepage's theatre, the classical text would only be a "starting point" (Dundjerovic 28).

*About the time I entered the fourth grade, I began creating stories in which a very handsome and masculine man would rescue a beautiful, feminine damsel in distress. The cast of these stories first included me and a woman on whom I had a crush, but over time the cast grew into older, more developed men and women. Because of my active imagination, these fantasies were extremely vivid, and as puberty accelerated, they became increasingly sexual. The settings would change, but the plots were always painfully clichéd, and the characters' behavior stuck to strictly normative gender roles with absolute precision. In high school (yes, I still invented these fantasies in high school), I tried several times to create a story involving two men, to see if being gay was something I was actually interested in. I could not, however, find a way to fit two men into the normatively gendered storylines I had been*

*playing with since elementary school. To me, this was empirical proof that being gay was not something I wanted, because if I were gay, I would never be able to have a romance like those I saw on TV and had imagined all my life.*

*When I came out to one of my brothers, he began asking me questions about growing up in an attempt to understand exactly what it meant for me to be gay. I used the example of Disney's animated children's film Aladdin (1992). I explained that I was attracted to the character Aladdin in the same way he was attracted to Jasmine. Unlike my brother, however, I was never able to pursue my interest in Aladdin, because Aladdin is a boy and must marry Jasmine, who is a woman. I explained further that this early interaction with gender roles would become a constant theme throughout my life. I wanted what the princes and princesses in Disney movies had: a storybook romance. Unfortunately for me, one had to be straight to have one of those. It took me the entirety of my adolescence to come to terms with the feeling that the stories I had grown up with, and the relationships I had yearned to emulate were not actually what I wanted. I will never forget my brother's response to this story: "Wow, it's like you had a completely different childhood than me, and I never knew it, even though we grew up right next to each other."*

Bornstein said of her life after her gender reassignment surgery, "to this day I don't know how to respond to a man attracted to me – I never learned the rituals" (39). This quote resonated with me when I read it, because I felt I had very similar issues relating to men (sexually, romantically, and platonically) before, and definitely after I decided to come out of the closet. The importance of the media on our perceptions of

gender and sexuality was already something I had been exploring, but after reading that quote, I felt it was imperative that this project attempt to highlight the ways in which homosexual relationships operate without explicit ritualistic guidelines and expectations from media and artistic outlets. On the one hand, this narrative vacuum is liberating. With no archetypal grand-narrative on which to base a relationship, there is the possibility for greater equality between lovers and much more fluidity in the roles we perform within a relationship. While the theoretical merits of a relationship without socialized rituals certainly exist, this void emerges from an even more problematic issue: the lack of queer narratives in popular art and media.

In the same way that “fables establish and circulate the misnomer of gender as a natural fact” (Butler xiii), these same stories ignore queer identities, leaving queer individuals confused and isolated in a world that appears to have no place for them. From the earliest possible age, children watch Disney movies that almost always revolve around the romance between a male and female character. These movies act as an early roadmap to aid young children in interacting with and pursuing interest in the opposite sex. I am not aware of a single movie geared toward children that in some way engages the narrative of two men or two women pursuing a romantic relationship.

Thus queer individuals grow up without the “map” for negotiating relationships (both friendly and romantic) given to their straight counter-parts from the earliest age possible. I realized that my thesis could address the “necessary project of recognizing and validating the creativity and heroism of [Queer identities/narratives]”

(Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 43). It occurred to me that perhaps this is why Student #1 picks up *Romeo and Juliet*: without a metaphoric gender script to follow, he uses the literal and quintessentially heterosexual script of *Romeo and Juliet* as the basis for his personal and queer exploration, because of a lack of really any other, more suitable option. While the theoretical exploration and deconstruction of gender and sexuality are imperative to the project, it was always important for me that the play also address the need for more stories about queer individuals and the legitimacy of their romantic lives in this country. Through the union of a classic heterosexual narrative and current issues and understandings of male homosexual identity, I hoped to explore a queer narrative that is both theoretically thought-provoking and engaging for queer audience members who do not often see much of themselves in artistic and media representations of love and desire.

*Romeo and Juliet* is the perfect point of departure for such a project. The play is the most often studied Shakespearean text in high school English classes and is often considered one of the greatest love stories ever told (Carroll 5, vii). Given our culture's familiarity, even obsession, with this story, I believe giving it a queer spin in turn adds much needed legitimacy to queer romance by allowing the queer community to experience a depiction of passion, desperation, and innocent young love that the straight community has been privy to since Shakespeare wrote the play some four hundred years ago.

### The Independent Variables

Calarco's convention of placing the action of the play within an all-boys Catholic school allows for exploration not only of issues of gender and sexuality in the world outside the play, but also within the text of *Romeo and Juliet* itself. Calarco stressed in his forward that the actors' job was to portray the schoolboys first and foremost, and that it is these characters who take on the various roles within Shakespeare's play (6). Through this additional layer, the schoolboys can voice their discontent both for the actions of their peers, such as when Romeo and Juliet kiss for the first time and the schoolboys and audience first experience homoeroticism within the play, and when the schoolboys are unhappy with choices that characters make in *Romeo and Juliet*. The latter opportunity became even more important to me when the mainstream news saw a dramatic spike in the reporting of queer young adults who have taken their lives because of bullying they experienced in the communities in which they live. Given that Romeo and Juliet also take their lives at the end of the play for similar reasons, I felt I had an obligation to address this issue of teen suicide in my production, but determining exactly how and why would be a long and difficult process that was not fully realized until later manifestations of this experiment.

In his forward, Calarco writes that the audiences who watched the original production of *Shakespeare's R&J* "forgot about gender altogether" (1). I asked myself: Do I want the audience to forget about gender? For me, issues of gender were some of the most interesting in the adaptation, and I felt that to "forget about gender" would negate what was really happening to the four boys. One of the greatest

discoveries I had while reading *Shakespeare's R&J* and envisioning four men playing all the roles was the complexity and strength of the character of Juliet. Juliet is often played as frail, with an airy affectation to her voice. When envisioning the character played by a man, however, I was struck by the immense strength and courage of this young woman. While Romeo dotes on Rosaline, and later Juliet, with a melancholy and idealized sentimentality, Juliet stands up to her father by refusing to marry Paris, risks death by accepting Friar Laurence's potion, and is able to outsmart Romeo and his nimble wordplay in order to insure that his intentions are noble. It is not that the character changed when I envisioned a man playing her; it is that the masculinity of the actor highlighted her strength. I was excited to explore this fascinating woman in a way that I had personally never seen before, namely as an agent of change within the play, rather than the object around which the other characters in the play circle.

As I began to consider possible casting choices for my production, I recalled an essay written for the April 26, 2010 online edition of *Newsweek* I read by a journalist named Ramin Setoodeh. In this article, Setoodeh criticizes a gay actor for his inability to convincingly portray a straight man on stage. Rather than consider the issue on an individual basis, he goes on to make broad statements that categorize all gay actors as only being capable of portraying "broad caricatures" of heterosexual people, and incapable of convincingly portraying realistic and multi-dimensional straight characters "like the ones in *Up in the Air* or even *The Proposal*" (Setoodeh). Sentiments like Setoodeh's are unfortunately common in the American industries of art, entertainment, and media. In a world in which all gender is performance, whether

it is on stage or off, casting opinions like Setoodeh's are not only unjustly generalizing, but also downright absurd. The ridiculousness of these beliefs lies not only in the assertion that all gender is performance (Soloman 34), but also because theatre is the performance of identity that is acknowledged as performance (Bornstein 147).

To fully explore the notion that "all theatrical gender assignments are ungrounded and contingent" (Garber 39), I planned to cast a female actor to play one of the four male parts in the play, though not Romeo or Juliet, as the homosexual tension between the infamous lovers is the basis for the project. The actors are not Catholic schoolboys, nor are they Tybalt Capulet, or Benvolio Montague. The actors are performing for the benefit of the audience in a way they believe these fictitious characters would behave were they reality, rather than the products of Shakespeare and Calarco's imaginations. Similarly Butler would argue that humans of all genders and sexualities perform and emulate what they imagine constructs like masculinity or femininity to be, even though society creates these guidelines like an author like Shakespeare creates the character Mercutio. As I saw it, casting a woman as a man would in no way alter the arc of the story, but rather would enhance it, because if there is no such thing as essential masculinity, then we are all performing anyway.

Before auditions, I distributed short scenes from the play for the actors to look over, as well as a description of the project and the four schoolboys' personalities. Though specific traits changed for each character (for instance, Student #1 became someone who identified as gay by the end of the project), the basic personality of each

character remained the same throughout the process. The descriptions were as follows:

Student 1: I see Student 1 as the most sexually progressive character in the show. I do not believe he has ever considered himself “gay” prior to falling for Student 2 (Juliet), and even after falling for him, I think he would refrain from labeling himself. Rather, he is simply open to intimacy (sexually and otherwise) with anyone he is attracted to, regardless of sex or gender. He is also the charismatic force that sets the play in motion, as in Calarco’s adaptation, Student 1 uses the opening prologue from *Romeo and Juliet* to incite the other students to act out the play with him.

Student 2: I see him as something of an “all-American” type; compassionate, down-to-earth, strong, and secure. I also see him as considering himself “straight,” and therefore being surprised by his feelings for Student 1 (Romeo). He is also sensitive and emotionally open, as it is Juliet, more than any other character, that muses on the nature of love and the complexity of her forbidden love for Romeo.

Student 3: This is likely to be the role that I will cast our female actor as, but it is important to remember that Student 3 is a young man, that Mercutio and Friar Laurence are men, and that Lady Capulet is a woman being played by a man. I believe Student 3 represents “appropriate” or socially acceptable relationships between men. This is complicated, however, by the fact that Mercutio has feelings for Romeo which are not socially acceptable (though not necessarily sexual), and by the fact that Student 3 is played by a woman.

Student 4: I see him as the voice of tradition and strict definitions of sexuality and gender. He is the most violent student, and the one least accepting of the relationship between Students 1 and 2. He is hyper-masculine (possibly to compensate for secret feelings he has that he believes are very un-masculine), and his portrayal of the Nurse is a parody of femininity that he believes is inferior to his machismo.

### Dependent Variable

Almost immediately after beginning the casting process, I began running into dilemmas that threatened the legitimacy of my hypothesis. I began to think that if I believe that the binary Setoodeh argues for is, in actuality, illusory and malignant, it makes sense that the other binary that functions around the issue of sexuality (i.e.



gender) is also illusory, malignant, and worthy of deconstruction and play. I decided, therefore to cast a woman to explore issues of male homosexuality in order to make both binaries (sexual orientation and gender) seem ridiculous.

The problem I kept running into, however, was that I felt I was contradicting myself when I would make a casting call by saying “I need three men and one woman for a four man production of *Romeo and Juliet* that will be exploring and deconstructing issues of gender and sexuality.” How could I hope to deconstruct gender when even my casting choices are so heavily rooted in the very binary I am attempting to deconstruct? I was concerned that in spite of myself, I – like Setoodeh – would end up simply perpetuating problematic gender issues, rather than deconstructing them. As luck -- or perhaps fate -- would have it, however, the audition process provided my answer.

Very few men auditioned, which is perhaps telling with regard to issues of masculine self-regard. Of the few men that did audition, there were not three that I felt were right for the project. There were, however, many extremely talented women auditioning for a single role. I had enough talented women to cast the play twice over, and I had no idea how I was going to say no to all these actors who deserved the part, in favor of a few men who were not as deserving of the opportunity. I realized that I had been presented with an opportunity to address another very pertinent, as yet unaddressed, concern of mine regarding casting in art and entertainment: the general lack of fully developed, interesting female parts available to the multitude of female actors in the theatre. Furthermore I saw an opportunity to take my desire to

deconstruct the gender and sexual binaries radically farther than I could have hoped.

After deliberating with Sarah Stevens and Dr. Jordan Schildcrout, I decided to take the idea of deconstruction of gender and sexuality through performativity in my original hypothesis to its most extreme conclusion: casting four women to play the four schoolboys. The cast was Krista Cickovskis as Student #1, Chloe Mockensturm as Student #2, Jessica Link as Student #3, and Emily Lerer as Student #4.

At the time, I felt particularly righteous in my decision because it seemed to me that I would now not only be deconstructing gender and sexuality theoretically. I would also be deconstructing these constructs practically in the theatre by addressing a very real and under-addressed problem in the western theatre: the shortage of multi-dimensional parts for female actors. I believed I would prove that this problem is not a problem at all because “all theatrical gender assignments are ungrounded and contingent” (Garber 39).

### Chapter Four: Experiment #2

Hypothesis #2: If I cast four women as the four schoolboys playing the seventeen characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, then cultural understandings of the divisions between man/woman and gay/straight will be so confusing for the audience they will have to be abandoned.

The change from four male actors playing the schoolboys to four female actors playing the schoolboys had many advantages. The additional layer of performance in the project served the purpose of radically destabilizing perceptions of gender and, to a lesser extent, sexuality. Gender became so destabilized that even I became gender-confused, so much so that I had a hard time keeping straight (pardon the pun) when the actors were portraying men, when they were portraying women, when they were both, or if they were neither. To me, it seemed as if the layers of gender were so confusing as to negate gender all together. I was no longer exploring masculinity as much as four young women's interpretations of masculinity. There were moments in the play (as when Student #4 takes on the role of the Nurse) that a woman was playing a woman being played by a man, meaning that the actor was playing a woman's idea of what a man's idea of what a woman is. I had effectively destabilized gender, but I had done it so well that I was now too confused to make any sense of what I was insinuating by having so many layers of gender performance.

A quote from Butler's *Gender Trouble* helped me to grasp the relationship between masculinity and femininity in a way that helped to make sense of my production and its new cast: "Gender is a relation or set of relations" (9). Gender, in other words, is relative (Butler 10). Essentially we can only consider ourselves a specific gender so long as our relationship with other peoples' genders supports our

assumption. The ways humans attract mates is an example of gender's relativity. Sedgwick points out that “what defines women as [women] is what turns men on” (*Between Men* 7). Conversely the argument can be made that what makes a man masculine are the traits he displays that prove he is a suitable mate for a female: thus, male and female become relative to one another.

Joan Riviere, a psychoanalyst and one of Freud's earliest translators, wrote, “womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it,” meaning that femininity is a series of gestures and postures that women perform in order to protect themselves from men by making it clear to the man that they are powerless, and thus not a threat (38). I speculated that if Riviere's assertion is true, then logically masculinity is also a performance: the performance of having power. But men do not simply perform power because they have it, rather, I believe, this performance emerges from an anxiety and/or fear that they are powerless (i.e. a woman). If my speculation were true, then this rationale for the performance of gender served to further emphasize the misogyny of the crisis of masculine self-regard, and demonstrate that “male” and “female” only exist on a heterosexual matrix.

The conclusion reached also highlights the paradox of the gender binary: each pole requires the other for existence, in that they are both defined as much by what they are as what they are not. Women perform femininity so as not to be confused as a man (i.e. as a threat to a more physically powerful individual), and men perform masculinity so as not to be confused as a woman (i.e. an individual without power). In

this way, men and women become producers and consumers of both masculinity and femininity, regardless of which they choose to perform. What this meant tangibly for my production was that by having the varied layers of gender performance, I was truly deconstructing the power system that forms the skeletal structure of the gender binary by giving women (the actors) permission to claim power, and forcing men (the schoolboys) to give up their power. More important, at least in the practical sense of the production, was that I now had something tangible with which to explore the shifts in genders, namely, the use of power.

This rationale deconstructed the gender not only of the actors and schoolboys on a meta-theatrical level, it also deconstructed the gender of the characters within Shakespeare's original play. Juliet, by this definition of gender is decidedly *not* feminine. As previously discussed, I believe she is a powerful individual who has no qualms about claiming autonomy whether she is speaking to a fellow woman or a man. Romeo, too, to a lesser extent perhaps than Juliet, is not especially masculine. He tends to run from his problems rather than confront them head on, as is made evident by his sulking over Rosaline, and his refusal to physically engage Tybalt. The claim that “all of Shakespeare's great characters are suspended between male and female” (Garber 39) suddenly seemed tangible.

Despite these exciting possibilities for the production's potential to explore issues of gender, however, there were numerous problems with the production's inability to fully engage issues of male homosexuality, homosocial bonding, and homoeroticism. Homosexuality between women carries different connotations – a

different “historical position” – in our society than homosexuality between men (Jagose 13). Though the four actors were playing men, I feared that the audience would read the homosexual tension more as lesbianism (because the actors are after all women) rather than tension between two men. Just because gender is a construct doesn't mean it does not exist. This play is about four school boys exploring their sexuality, which, in the culture in which I was raised and in which this play operates, regardless of the theoretical abstractness of gender, is different than four women exploring their sexuality, and certainly is different than a group of boys and women exploring their sexuality with each other, even if only because our society has willed it so). I did not want to negate the realities of the homosexual experience to prove a theoretical point about the socially constructed nature of gender. But, then, I was equally hesitant to deny that these are not just four boys, these are four women performing as boys.

As I saw it, female homosexuality is, if not condoned in our society, eroticized in a popular culture that I find still views male homosexuality as obscene and grotesque. The challenge, then, was to find a way to make the image of two women (pretending to be men) engaging in homoerotic behavior obscene and grotesque in a way that is, if not similar, then at least comparable to the image of two men engaging in such behavior.

### Independent Variables

Over winter break, between auditions and the first rehearsal, I asked the actors to watch movies that dealt with what we would be exploring. I thought that this would be a fun and accessible introduction to the complex issues of gender and sexual performance we would be engaging during the rehearsal process. I recommended movies like *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Billy Elliot* (2000), *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001), *Soldier's Woman* (2003), *Friday Night Lights* (2004), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), and *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005) to get them thinking about what kinds of behaviors men grow up being expected to fulfill. I also recommended these movies so the actors would begin to look at how the characters in these movies either rebel or conform to these social codes of conduct, especially the effect homosexual desire and behavior has on how individuals and others around them perceive masculinity. I also suggested they watch romantic comedies and dramas, including Disney movies, because these films shape children's ideas about how one's gender is properly performed, especially when interacting with the opposite sex. Finally I asked them to watch *Short Bus* (2006) as an exploration of provocative sexual behavior, as that would be a major component of the project.

*Short Bus*, directed by John Cameron Mitchell, was workshopped with the actors in a way that was similar to what I wanted to do with *Romeo and Juliet*. I borrowed a few of their techniques, most notably by asking the actors to come up with the name of their character. I knew that I wanted to give the Students actual names, rather than numbers, in order to make them more individual and tangible. I felt that

allowing each actor to create the name of her student would be a way for the actors to form a more personal relationship with the character, as well as give them permission to be creative with how the character would grow and evolve over the course of rehearsals. Student #1 became Chase Hawkins, Student #2 became Ethan Palmer, Student #3 became Dominic Ward, and Student #4 became Chad “The Moose” Withers (later changed to Chad “The Moose” Weinstein).

The layers of gender performance, which were seemingly infinite, were painstakingly tracked and shaped during the rehearsal process in order to keep specific in the minds of both the actors and myself the shifting layers of gender identity, as well as to allow such shifting to continue to complicate the specificity of gender identity in the minds of the audience. One outcome of the shifting layers of gender performance was that even in rehearsals, forgotten and overlooked lines of text immediately sprang to new life and meaning. Friar Lawrence’s chiding Romeo’s “womanish” tears in Act 3, scene 3, suddenly went from a mild insult to a defining moment in the show: a woman, playing a boy, playing another boy is being accused of not properly performing his gender makes the entire idea of “proper” performance of gender impossible. I had not imposed this idea on the script; we simply contextualized the ideas in the scene differently. I suspect, or at least hope that those who saw the show will never be able to think about that scene the same way again.

The first and largest problem with the process was that I had little to no idea how to coach four young women on how to act like men before rehearsals began. I used Michael Chekhov’s psycho-physical acting technique as the basis for helping the



women move and behave “like men,” along with Anne Bogart and Tina Landau’s Viewpoint work to address issues of how one uses space and spatial relationship in different ways. While these approaches were effective, both techniques are so broad and diverse that I spent a large chunk of valuable rehearsal time developing specific exercises to explore and help the women understand how to perform masculinity effectively.

Chekhov’s psycho-physical technique arose from a need he saw to increase the “sensitivity of [the] body to the psychological creative impulses” (Chekhov 2). He believed that the “body of an actor must absorb psychological qualities, must be filled and permeated with them so that they will convert it gradually into a sensitive membrane, a kind of receiver and conveyor of the subtlest images, feelings, emotions and will impulses” ( 2). By developing the imagination “through systematic exercises,” Chekhov believed the actor could hone the body and the mind into a single instrument with the capacity to “create...discover and show new things” (27) about the body and psychology of the character being played, as well as about the mood, tone, and themes of the play as a whole.

To help the women experience the world in a male body, I decided to start by using Chekhov's “imaginary body” exercise, in which the actor imagines that a part of her or his body transforms, and then allow this change to affect their behavior. At the second rehearsal, for example, each actor chose a different image: one assumed the entire body, face and dress of Han Solo (a rugged and strong male character from the *Star Wars* [1977] trilogy); another imagined a full beard on her face; and another

imagined that she was ten feet tall with huge arm muscles. At this point, I did not know what to look for, as I was not entirely sure what made a person appear masculine. When the actors adopted their imaginary bodies, their jaws would become more set, chests would swell and rise, steps became more deliberate, hips rotated up and down (rather than side to side), and arms swung loosely at their sides, but the women still lacked confidence in their new bodies.

Viewpoint work became useful to address this issue of how the women take up space. Bogart and Landau define Viewpoint work as “a philosophy translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and (3) creating movement for the stage” (7). There are nine Viewpoints, each of which represents a different dimension of movement: Spatial Relationship, Kinesthetic Response, Shape, Gesture, Repetition, Architecture, Tempo, Duration, and Topography (Bogart, Landau 6). By isolating and combining some or all of the nine Viewpoints through various exercises, actors develop a movement “vocabulary” that allows for more spontaneity in moments, as well as “helps [the actor to] recognize the limitations we impose on ourselves and our art by habitually submitting to a presumed *absolute authority*...Viewpoints leads to greater *awareness*, which leads to greater *choice*, which lead to greater *freedom*” (Bogart, Landau 19). By asking the actors to pay attention to the space that they occupied, their spatial relationships with their fellow actors, and the room in which they worked, they began to see that the way they use space is different from the way men move when walking down a street or through a hall way.

One exercise, led by Professor Rebecca Vernooy, was to set up four chairs in the middle of the room and ask the women to sit in a chair and wait for a very important job interview. We then repeated the exercise, but this time we asked them to enter the space as men. The shift was immediate and startlingly specific: the “men” chose “the chair I wanted” rather than the one closest to them. They also took up more space in the room while they waited; meaning both that they physically spread their legs out and broadened their shoulders, but also their non-physical presence in the room was greater, and less apologetic.

The actors were actually rather shaken by this discovery. Lerer, for instance, who believed she was a very masculine woman before the rehearsal process began, was surprised to find that she used space in very “feminine” ways. It was emotionally difficult for them to come to terms with the idea that women apologize for occupying space, rather than taking it as men do, as well as that they, as women, behave in this way. They had never before realized that, solely because of their gender, they were conditioned to, in Lerer’s words, “complement a space,” rather than inhabit it (Lerer).

Around the tenth rehearsal, I began to see that words like “masculine” and “feminine” were confusing the actors, and making them waddle around like plastic dolls with an inappropriate number of joints. Indeed, when I would ask for an adjustment like “sink more into your hips” I would achieve what I desired, a more confident stride, with weight being carried lower in the body. Despite seeing what I wanted to see from the actors, I would get responses like “but I feel more feminine like this, I don’t feel like a man.”

As a result of this discovery, as well as other smaller ones that resulted from working with the actors on moving like men, I determined that the best way to approach this work was to focus on several psycho-physical qualities associated with masculine behavior, rather than on masculinity itself. These qualities were muscle (moving with a feeling of strength in the body, especially upper body), weight (moving from a center of gravity low in the pelvis), and entitlement of space (to quote Bornstein, “male privilege is the assumption that one has the right to occupy a place or person” [108]). Some women had more problems with one of these three qualities than another, but by focusing on how the women used these three qualities we were able to achieve at least a satisfactory level of competence in performing male-gendered behavior. Specifically (though not exclusively) the women began to move with more power, confidence, and a propensity for violence. This last quality was one of the most interesting, in retrospect, to discover. Bornstein adds to her definition of male privilege that “male privilege is violence” (108), which I understand as follows: male privilege is the assumption that one has the right to occupy a place or person *and* the assumption that one has the right to utilize aggression and violence on obstacles to this right of occupation.

### Dependent Variable

At the seventeenth rehearsal I asked Vernooy and Schildcrout to watch a run-through of the show. Though I had actually been feeling very confident about the play, it became immediately clear that a lot was still missing from the performance.

While the story of *Romeo and Juliet* was being told clearly and effectively, I had not blocked the show to take full advantage of the space. The stakes that the actors were working with were not high enough, particularly when it came to issues of love and death. Most important, the storyline of the four schoolboys and their struggles with the text and with each other as they explore Shakespeare's play was at best muddy and unspecific, at worst, lost altogether.

As I had feared, issues of gender were being explored and fully developed, but issues of sexuality, especially as it pertains to young American males, were lost or nonexistent. It became clear that simply using Calarco's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* would not be enough to tell the story I hoped to tell. I would have to use a mixture of well thought-out directing ideas, include current events, and adapt Calarco's adaptation in order to make my play starring four women playing four schoolboys acting out *Romeo and Juliet* into a theatrical production that explored issues of gender *and* sexuality in twenty-first century America.

### Chapter Five: Experiment #3

Hypothesis #3: If I frame the text of *Romeo and Juliet* in the theoretical world of gender and sexual identity theory by writing a script that exists simultaneously within *Romeo and Juliet*, and that explicitly discusses issues of gender and sexual orientation in the contemporary western world, then the four women will be able to successfully explore issues of male homosexual identity in a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Even before the first rehearsal, I knew I had taken on a bigger project than I could ever hope to fully realize. I did not fully appreciate the scope and size of the project, however, until I had begun rehearsals, and realized just how much of Calarco's script I needed to revise in order to fully address the issues I wanted to address. His cuts to Shakespeare's text were very helpful, as he did a fantastic job of cutting up scenes and assigning parts in such a way as to make it very easy for four actors to tell the story of *Romeo and Juliet* clearly, while keeping the famous parts of the play. But I needed to make a two-act show running approximately two hours into a one-act running under an hour-and-a-half, which in and of itself was difficult, considering Calarco and I were working with a text originally five acts long and running about three hours.

I came to realize that I was not doing *Romeo and Juliet*, but rather what four sixteen-year-old boys' idea of *Romeo and Juliet* might be. This realization gave me the point of view and permission I needed to make serious changes to the script. It became very clear that the only scenes that truly mattered were the ones in which the four schoolboys would have a strong point-of-view. If the scene would not be in some way relevant, exciting, or repulsive for one or more of the boys, there was no point in including it in my production.

For instance I knew that, given the context of my play, I had to do something with the balcony scene. It is an iconic scene of young, straight love. I could not, therefore, simply direct the scene as everyone would expect it to be done because part of the project was to explore what is different about perceptions of homosexual romantic relationships. After wandering in circles about exactly how to explore this difference, Schildcrout explained that what he saw me doing, and what he wanted to see more of, was a “punk-patchwork-collage.” This irreverent cut-and-paste image was exactly what I needed to make the script work for me as I needed it to. I cut the balcony scene up with lines from the previous scene, in which Mercutio attempts to “conjure” Romeo with insults and sexual innuendos. The effect was that while Chase (playing Romeo) desperately tries to experience the kind of romantic wooing scene straight boys are often privy to, Dominic and Moose (playing Mercutio and the Nurse respectively) interrupt the intimate moment, robbing the other young men of a moment many straight couples have experienced, even if only on the stage. I then reprised the balcony scene later in the play, before the “morning-after scene” (after Romeo and Juliet have consummated their marriage) in order to give the young lovers a different but equally fulfilling romantic experience.

The cuts to the balcony scene resulted in some of my favorite moments in the show. Dominic and Moose's robbing Chase and Ethan of the balcony scene at its proper place in the script is made all the more visceral and clear by the iconic nature of the scene. When Dominic and Moose interrupt the scene with catcalls and allusions to female genitalia, ultimately forcing the scene to end prematurely, it is clear that their

homophobia is denying the young men an intimate and lovely opportunity to explore their feelings for one another, as well as the nature of love itself. The dramatic irony created by nearly everyone in the audience knowing what was supposed to come next amplifies this feeling of missed opportunity. Even people unfamiliar with the rest of the play know what is about to happen when Romeo begins “Hark, what light through yonder window breaks?” (2.1).

The new location of the balcony scene in my adaptation gives the scene added poignancy. I situated the reprisal of the scene after Act 3, scene 3, in which Friar Laurence informs Romeo that he is banished as punishment for murdering Juliet's cousin, Tybalt. The stakes are therefore high for the characters, which better represents the danger felt by young gay lovers as they explore their feelings in a society that does not approve of, and even attempts to actively and passively obstruct this exploration. Tybalt and Mercutio, and Dominic and Moose act out violently because of Romeo and Juliet's relationship, and likewise Chase and Ethan's, which culminates in the death of Mercutio and Tybalt, and the utter humiliation of Dominic and Moose. The balcony scene's new position means that this violent reaction against the romance occurs before the scene begins, which changes the tone of the scene dramatically. Before, when Juliet asks “What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet; / So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd” (2.3), the question is innocent and endearing. Now the question is one of grave importance, as the lives of her family and her lover are now in jeopardy. There is a tone of morbid futility in the question now as well, as Juliet comes to terms with the



devastation that her relationship with Romeo has wrought on her family, and will continue to do so if she remains in a relationship with him.

As the scene progresses, Juliet's back-and-forth rhetoric, between wanting to give over to Romeo and understanding the danger of her position, is given added justification. When Romeo finally does convince her that their love is worth risking their parents' wrath, it is clear that both Romeo and Juliet are passing the point of no return. These stakes are not as clear when the scene is located at the beginning of the play, before either Romeo or Juliet really understand what they risk by continuing their relationship. This point-of-no-return tone to the end of the scene is perfect for the structure of the story, as the scene that follows is the "morning after scene," when Romeo and Juliet wake in the same bed, having just consummated their relationship, and say goodbye to each other (for what will ultimately be the last time) before Romeo accepts exile and leaves Verona for Mantua. I will discuss this moment, and how I used it, in more detail later in this chapter.

Simply reorganizing the text, however, was not enough to draw out the storyline of the four schoolboys and their journey through the themes and issues being explored. I began by augmenting the classroom text that Calarco added to the script with text that I felt better contextualized the world of my production. While the "book reports" Calarco wrote for the schoolboys to read at the beginning of the play all dealt with gender divisions in a socio-historical context, I wanted to demonstrate that pressure to conform to gender and sexual norms come from every direction, not simply our understanding of history and sociology. I decided to have the boys "attend"

four classes before diving into their production of *Romeo and Juliet*, with each of the boys giving a book report or presentation in a different subject. Dominic read aloud the Act of Contrition (given to Student #1 along with Shakespeare's Sonnet 147 in Calarco's adaptation) at the beginning of classes in a manner that is similar to the Mass many Catholic school children must attend before the start of classes. A bell rings and the boys move off to history class, where Ethan reads a book report on the differences in genders (taken from Calarco's adaptation). After another bell, the students move to biology, where Moose gives a presentation on Angus John Bateman's theory of anisogamy, or the difference in production of gametes, which holds that “as a result of anisogamy, males are fundamentally promiscuous, and females are fundamentally selective,” for which he is ridiculed by his peers because it is obvious he simply copied his report from Wikipedia. Finally the students move to English class, where Chase reads Sonnet 147 while making significant glances in Ethan's direction.

### Independent Variables

Revising the book report convention to frame the play within a context that more specifically speaks to the issues my production was exploring was not enough to bring the four schoolboys fully to life for the audience. I was at a loss as to how to make it clear that the four schoolboys played by the actors were distinct from the parts they played in *Romeo and Juliet*, and more important, that they did not always agree with the behavior of the characters they and their peers played. I recalled a short passage in Garber's *Vested Interests* that had struck me as very interesting when I read

it, but had largely forgotten about it because I had not found enough theoretical substance behind it to include it in my compiling of research. The passage discusses the position of public restrooms in the understanding, performance of, and debate over gender.

Garber's main point is that the bifurcation of public restrooms along gender lines reinforces the division, and also makes the simple and necessary act of going to the bathroom extremely complicated for queer individuals, particularly transgender individuals, who are often not permitted to use either men's or women's restrooms because of complaints by other patrons. This idea of the public restroom as the final frontier of gender divisions was incredibly intriguing to me, and pertinent to my project, though I wasn't quite sure how until I recalled a particular portion of this passage that describes the urinal as the ultimate marker of gender-difference, and thus becomes a test of gender identity for men and female-to-male transsexuals (Garber 14).

In an instant I realized how I could convince the audience to, in Alisa Solomon's word, "accept" that the four actors were men for the duration of the play, while simultaneously giving the boys a forum to discuss their feelings about Shakespeare's play and the issues it is bringing up among them. I dubbed the convention the "urinal scene," in which the schoolboys would gather around a four-sided pillar while simulating the act of peeing at a urinal, the ultimate mark of masculinity. I wrote a series of conversations the boys have while gathered around the

urinals, which discuss issues in the play, as well as actual events occurring outside the play, and indeed the production itself.

One such conversation centered on a still-existent law, originally passed in the 1980's, in Australia that gives the principals of private schools the authority to expel a student on the *suspicion* that the student was a homosexual (Marr). Early in the process, the actors and I decided that the Prince of *Romeo and Juliet* would take on the attributes of the four schoolboys' principal. It therefore seemed logical to place this conversation around the first entrance of the Prince, so that when the Prince banishes Romeo later in the play, connections could be drawn between that moment in the play and the power some wish to give to principals in Australia, and parts of the US as well ("HU Queer Press"), to "banish" students on the grounds of their sexuality. I even named the Principal of the four boys "Principal Wallace" after Jim Wallace, who is a major and highly vocal proponent of keeping and utilizing the law in Australia (Marr).

Another conversation included a discussion of the sexuality of several comic book characters inspired by a quote from Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw*, which reads: "Just because Catwoman is a woman and Batman is a boy does not make their encounters heterosexual...there is nothing straight about two people getting it on in rubber and latex costumes, wearing eye-masks and carrying whips and other toys" (36). Other similarly humorous conversations occur, such as when Moose reflects that Walt Disney and his production company have the right idea in ignoring queer narratives by only showing romantic relationships between a man and a woman, to which Ethan and Chase counter, "You do know Walt Disney was a raging anti-

Semite? Right? I don't think he would have approved of you any more than he approves of the 'queers,' Chad *Weinstein*.” I changed the Moose's last name from Withers to Weinstein in order to make that joke possible. Not all of the “urinal scenes” are as jovial as these, however. The boys discuss the recent suicide of a young boy at a neighboring school that was likely the result of anti-gay bullying, and whether or not Ethan and Chase kissing, which is written into the script of *Romeo and Juliet*, makes either of the boys gay, among other theoretically and emotionally difficult topics.

The inclusion of the urinal scenes was successful for a number of reasons. Both the image of the actors at the urinals, as well as their banter, which ranged in tone from witty play to aggressive intimidation, gave the schoolboys an appropriate youthful vivaciousness and hormonal angst they were sorely missing in previous drafts of my adaptation. The urinal scenes also allowed me to engage the complex theoretical research I had done without beating the audience over the head. Another advantage of the urinal scenes was that they allowed me to respond to current event issues regarding gender and sexuality that I found extremely relevant to the project, but had not found a way to incorporate. I think this also had the added benefit of reminding the audience that these issues are not merely theoretical, but something that individuals like themselves wrestle with on a daily basis outside the space of the production.

The urinal scenes also led to another and totally unexpected convention. Very early in the process, before I even had a cast, Vernooy suggested I use dildos to

represent the sexual activity I wished to explore. I dismissed the idea as being too absurd for the world of the play I hoped to create. With the actors now standing in front of imaginary urinals, simulating urinating while doing it, however, the idea of using dildos seemed not only fitting, but also somehow logical, even necessary. I realized too, that there were other opportunities for the actors to essentially “whip out their manhood” over the course of the show. In the end, the dildos, which the actors kept in the pants’ pockets of their costumes and were thus visible through the fabric depending on how the women were standing, were whipped out any time they gathered around the urinals and during several of the fight scenes that occur throughout the play.

The dildos (a last minute addition to the production that the women had only four rehearsals to work with) worked well and served several equally important functions. For instance, they deconstructed the notion that genitalia is a gender signifier by making *the* male signifier (the penis) into an accessory that is separate from the individual, however important it might be to “his” identity. Based on the reactions that I got from audience members in the talkback sessions, I believe the dildos did effectively dramatize this complex theoretical idea. The dildos, which were huge, veiny, and wobbled constantly, were appropriately absurd. When the boys whipped them out in fight scenes in order to emphasize their masculinity, the masculine posturing came off as absurd and incongruous as the silicon phalluses themselves.

The dildos were also used in one more scene. The space in between the reprised balcony scene and the morning after scene became the perfect opportunity to solve one of the more problematic aspects of the show for me. As previously discussed, my biggest fear about casting four women rather than four men in the project was that the homoeroticism displayed by the actors/characters would be read by the audience as lesbianism (which in a sense it is, given the gender of the actors), which holds a different cultural stigma than homosexual behavior between two men (which is what the actors are representing by playing schoolboys).

I decided the way to combat this conundrum was to actually show the two lovers engage in the sexual union that is usually only alluded to at the start of the next scene. I intended the audience to feel uncomfortable watching the erotically charged union of the two lovers, and thereby create an effect similar to that of watching two actual men kiss. The actors began kissing passionately and running their hands over each other's bodies. As the scene began to heat up, Chase and Ethan unzipped each other's pants and removed each other's dildos from their pockets, holding onto them firmly but intimately. This is the only moment in the play when a boy touches another's phallus. Chase then moved to sit on Ethan's lap and simulated thrusting. Ethan then moved from underneath of Chase to allow Chase to move behind him, where the act of coitus continued to be simulated. Both actors remained fully clothed, but the image was no less startling and unmistakably sexual. After the two finished, they returned each other's dildos to their owner's pockets, and lay down to "sleep" before they woke up to continue with the morning-after scene. Because the actors

playing the young men involved in the scene are women, divisions of gender and sexuality became incredibly problematic. As Schildcrout put it, the event was “simultaneously heterosexual (Romeo and Juliet), gay male (Chase and Ethan), and lesbian (the actresses)” (Schildcrout).

Even before I decided to cast women, I had known I wanted to do something like the scene described above. Since coming up with the idea, I debated who should have what position. As previously discussed, there are assumptions made about one’s character when one is described as a “top” or “bottom.” My initial reaction, therefore, was to subvert the audience’s expectations about who would act as the masculine top and who would act as the feminine bottom. It was for this reason that I first envisioned Student #2 as an “all-American” jock, rather than an effeminate and passive boy one might expect to play Juliet. I was not happy with this binary way of thinking, because I do not believe that it fully addressed what I believe to be the potentially egalitarian power structure of homosexual intercourse. Whereas during heterosexual intercourse the ability of the woman to penetrate or top the man requires props, in homosexual intercourse, both parties can play either role at any time. I believe that my decision to have Chase and Ethan assume both roles over the course of the scene fulfills what Bornstein describes as the need for art and theatre that portrays all sex, regardless of orientation or fetish, as “consensually sadomasochistic” (162).

The audiences’ reception of the scene was just as I had hoped. The mixture of thrusting, passionate kissing, and dildos created the tone I hoped it would, as well as reminded the audience that what they were watching was intended to be two young



boys engaging in carnal acts. There were a myriad of reactions, all of which I thought were perfect: the initial reaction was that nearly everyone's jaw dropped open. After the shock wore off, many held a knowing smile on their face, while others held a hand across their agape mouth to hide either their horror, amusement, or some combination of the two. Others, like a friend of mine who identifies as gay, nodded his head in sincere, conspiratorial approval the entire time. Others were horrified, and some even looked at the exit as if trying to decide whether it would be more awkward to walk out in the middle of the scene or stay, and continue watching. I even had several people walk up to me after the show to say that once they understood “what I was doing” with the scene, they spent the rest of the time watching other audience member's reactions to the two young lovers.

The use of dildos was not, however, the only gendered theatrical convention employed in my production. At the first rehearsal, I told the actors that I was considering asking them to bind their breasts. I was not sure if this was something I wanted to do, however, because I found the restrictive nature of binding theoretically problematic. I felt the idea of removing the actors' gender signifiers (their breasts) by painfully flattening them against their bodies was counter to my goal of creating an atmosphere of play within the gender binary. I also felt uncomfortably privileged as a man, by asking four women to bind themselves for the purpose of my exploration of male homosexuality in America. The actors insisted that binding would help them feel more like men, however, and they observed that some male behavior, such as puffing out the chest, was easier to commit to with a bound chest. In addition to the

binding, the actors' costumes consisted of identical black plaid button-down shirts, black belts, khaki pants, black shoes, and black baseball hats under which they hid their hair.

The changes to the book reports at the beginning of the play not only succeeded in showing that gender and sexuality are not simply shaped by socio-historical forces but all facets of our daily life (including science and technology). These changes also created an opportunity to show how the four schoolboys grow and change by the end of the play. At the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*, the boys return to the classrooms to give another round of reports. This time, Chase reads the Prince's final monologue at the end of the play which ends "go hence, to have more talk of these sad things; / Some shall be pardon'd, and some punished: / For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo" (5.3). Rather than begging for forgiveness for sins against God, Dominic recites the Serenity Prayer, which includes the line "Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it." Moose continues presenting his research on ansogamy, this time taking up Olivia Judson's perspective by quoting that "Bateman's principle is incorrect for such a large percentage of species that it should no longer be considered a valid principle" (Wikipedia).

In Calarco's adaptation, the final moment of the play is a mixture of monologues from various plays of Shakespeare, the most central and prominent being Puck's final monologue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I did not like this ending because, after all that the students have gone through and learned over the course of

the play, I found the mood to be too whimsical and carefree. Nor did I feel that this idea engaged the themes of the play in any substantial way, much less conclude them. What is more, the idea of giving the audience permission to dismiss the play because “this weak and idle theme / [is] no more yielding but a dream” (5.1) was dishonest to the project, and those the project aims to help. Issues of gender and sexuality are not, as far as I am concerned, “weak and idle themes,” and though the events of the play were both fictional and highly stylized, the issues with which the four boys struggle are very real for a very real portion of the population, myself included. I therefore set about to find another way to end the play that would put some kind of button on the themes and ideas addressed in the play, while presenting the audience with a proper tone to walk away with.

Another issue I hoped to address was the gender of the four actors. It was very important that the audience accept that the four women are men for the duration of the play, but it was also essential that they never forget that the actors are read as women outside the play, as well as in most other theatrical productions. The number and intricacy of the layers of gender in this production border of the absurd, which was precisely the point. I wanted to work into the performance, at some point, a “reveal” in which the actors acknowledge their female gender, which would further complicate the way the audience perceived the gender of those participating in the performance -- both real and fictional -- and thus, perhaps complicate their perceptions of gender outside the performance space. I found a way to do this *and* end the show in a way I saw fitting with the help of Rosalind's epilogue in *As You Like It*.

Solomon's review of Cheek by Jowl's 1991 all-male production of *As You Like It*, in her book *Redressing the Cannon*, was the first piece of research I read in preparation for this project. Her description of their production stuck me with throughout the project, particularly her description of Rosalind's epilogue that, in the context of their production, subtly and powerfully questioned the naturalness of heterosexuality (Soloman 25). It came time to give Ethan something to read for his final book report, something that would acknowledge the nature of gender performance in this particular production, conclude the discussion on issues of gender and sexuality, and leave the audience with something to chew on as they left the space. The decision was relatively easy: Rosalind's epilogue!

I felt that Ethan was the right boy to have this monologue, because I felt he was the bravest of the boys for being willing to take on the role of Juliet, and as a result of playing Juliet, grew the most in his understandings of the nature of gender. Ultimately all the actors took a portion of the monologue, as its subject matter pertained to all of them equally. Performed in Shakespeare's time by a young man, or boy, playing a woman who pretends to be a man, the monologue is a very witty deconstruction of gender, made all the more impressive because it implies that Shakespeare himself was already at least partially aware of the performative nature of gender some three hundred years before Rubin would make a similar postulation.

In both the original production and Cheek by Jowl's recent production, the line "if I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me and breathes that I defied not" (5.4) questions our

understandings of masculinity and femininity. The actor, who in both productions was perceived by the audience to be definitively male, who gives this speech acknowledges his gender, and thus the performative nature of his femininity and Rosalind's masculinity, and as a result, his masculinity as well. This line becomes, at first glance, ironic when four female actors speak it, as they did in this production. To have four women ask, "If I were a woman," however, simply and clearly drives the point that all gender assignments are based on perception and performance, and thus illusory. By stating, "If I were a woman," the actors acknowledge the social constructed and non-essential nature of gender, and ask the audience to do the same.

During this final moment, the actors let down their hair, acknowledging their gender, at least as far as the majority of western culture is concerned. Yet they remained bound and in male clothing, which, when coupled with the above paradox of their words, created the effect of androgyny, or a third space apart from the binary of male and female, a place of possibility.

### Dependent Variable

Because so much of the project revolved around societal and cultural perceptions, it was very important to have some way to gauge the audience's reaction to the production. To that end, I held audience talkbacks after all three performances, in which the audience, cast, and director could ask each other questions. Most of the audiences' questions revolved around the process of getting the actors to behave like men. I described the Chekhov and Viewpoint work, and one of the actors voiced her

appreciation for Jay-Z. One of the activities we played with to help the actors with their gait and how they hold their weight in a more masculine manner was to have them listen to “Run This Town” by Jay-Z. At first, the women looked ridiculous, but after I encouraged them not to think in terms of walking “like a man,” but rather, like someone with confidence and security in their space, they developed the proper “straight-boy swag” I was looking for.

Other activities that stuck out for the actors and me during the talk-backs, aside from the ones already described, were the urinal and dildo tutorials, in which I took the four women into a men's bathroom, and showed them how to properly urinate in the toilet while standing. The women were at first pointing their phalluses in ways that would have guaranteed splatter, or would move and shake them while talking in ways that would similarly guarantee a mess. I also described the urinal etiquette lessons I gave the women, which included reprimands for the eye contact they attempted while urinating, as well as an acknowledgement that the at length conversations I wrote for them while they were gathered around the urinals would, outside the world of a stylized play, be very inappropriate in American male restrooms.

Ultimately the project of getting the actors to behave like men was not totally successful. I got several comments to the effect of “I would have liked the show better if there had actually been guys up there exploring these issues.” While this failure to fully achieve masculine performance was not ideal for the production in some ways, even the actors’ failure to fully perform masculinity is informative for the larger issues

of gender and sexuality in which this project exists. Specifically one member of the audience noted that the women threw very unconvincing punches. I agreed with his analysis, as I was unhappy with the way the women fought, even after dedicating entire rehearsals to addressing the fight scenes. What seems to be implied by this frustration and ineffectual fighting style is that violence, or at least the violent taking of space, *is* deeply related to the normative male experience and not the female experience, and as such, is not something most women are comfortable with.

Unfortunately the explorations that resulted in such important understandings about masculinity took too much time relative to the amount of time available to us in a six-week rehearsal process. The explorations were necessary, but ultimately took away from other essential aspects of the rehearsal process, especially scene work. We spent so much time working on the “how” of a scene, elements like motivation and trying to “achieve” in moments received less attention than they are due.

Another limitation of the gender experience of my cast is that I would have liked to explore the relationship between homosocial bonding and homoeroticism with more detail and nuance. Sedgwick theorizes that “in men's heterosexual relationships, the ultimate goal is bonding between men... and that this bonding is definitive of masculinity” (*Between Men* 50). Also, when looking at the issue of homosocial bonding, the issue of sexuality always arises. As Sebastian Junger, the co-director of a war documentary *Restrepo* (2010), writes:

If you deprive men of the company of women for too long, and then turn off the steady adrenaline drip of heavy combat, it may not turn sexual, but it's certainly going to turn weird. And weird it was strange pantomimed man-rape and struggles for dominance and grotesque,

smoochy come-ons that could only make sense in a place where every other form of amusement had long since been used up. ... It was just so hypersexual that gender ceased to matter. (Junger)

Others would disagree, going as far as to say that “real’ men need sex no matter what, so choosing abstinence can only mean you’re not a real man. Who you have sex *with* is of far lesser importance” (qtd. in Junger). To consider homosocial bonding in relation to desire and eroticism is to hypothesize the unbroken continuum between homosocial and homosexual desire (Sedgwick 1, *Between Men*).

Such a continuum is extremely dangerous to modern conceptions of masculinity, and is therefore something I would have liked to harness with more precision and dexterity. I believe such an undertaking would have required a male cast, at least with the amount of time I had to work on the project, because the “strange pantomimed man-rape and struggles for dominance and grotesque, smoochy come-ons” (Junger), which are emblematic of straight homosocial interaction, were not something the women grasped easily. To get the actors to convincingly participate in horseplay like that described above required more time than we had in the six-week rehearsal process.



## Chapter Six: The Conclusion

Suicide is one aspect of the project that I have not yet discussed. I waited until the end of this thesis to discuss it, because it turned out to be the most challenging issue to address. As a result, I feel that the way I finally approached the suicide became a thesis statement to the process as a whole. As I began researching this project during the fall of 2010, the mainstream news cycle and online blogosphere saw a drastic rise in coverage of teen suicides that were the result of bullying regarding sexuality.

The ways in which the media approached the subject were troubling as well. While the behavior that spurred the suicides was being criticized, there was little to no criticism of the suicidal behavior itself. This radically unhealthy behavior was being excused because of the situations the victims lived in. I feared that this kind of rhetoric would lead to a “suicide contagion,” meaning that “publicizing gay youth suicide may provoke similar behavior among vulnerable youth” (Savin-Williams). I believed that the amount of attention and sympathy being given to the suicide victims would entice others to follow suit in an attempt for similar recognition.

I also had a problem with whom the “gay youth suicide epidemic” referred to. In reality, not all of the teens who became emblematic of the need for an end to homophobic bullying were gay, or even had homosexual desires. Rather, “bullies select their victims based less on their same-sex sexual attractions than on their gender non-conformity” (Savin-Williams). It seemed to me that the media was oversimplifying a very complex issue, just as everything else in this culture relating to

sexuality. Given the stakes of the current crisis, I found this overgeneralization of the victims to be counterproductive and dangerous.

Given the actions taken by Romeo and Juliet at the end of the play, I felt obligated to address the issue of teen suicide. I could not fully address issues of gender and sexual identity in a culture that leaves gender non-conforming teens feeling as if they have no option but suicide in a play that is ultimately about teen suicide without including a discussion of teen suicide. I was not sure, however, what my position should be. I did not want to condone the suicidal behavior, but I also did not want to be insensitive to the victims of bullying who took their lives. I was not sure whether to allow the lovers to kill themselves, and comment on the behavior after the fact, or to stop the action of the play before the act of suicide. After numerous discussions with the cast and my advising team, I decided to split the difference, and include all perspectives in the final moment of Shakespeare's script.

I included multiple references to teen suicide in the urinal scenes, so that the characters and the audience would begin to develop their own opinions about teen suicide as it relates to my project. Chase, a romantic who sympathizes with the victims of homophobic bullying and the suicides it sometimes triggers, commits fully to the final act, and dies in a way he finds "tragic and beautiful." Ethan, however, refuses to kill himself (as Juliet) because he finds the behavior ludicrous. In early drafts of the ensuing argument over the legitimacy of both Chase and Ethan's opinions on the suicide of Romeo and Juliet, only Chase and Ethan spoke. I was not satisfied with the dialogue, however, because I felt that the point of views of Dominic and the

Moose were equally valid to the discussion, given that their actions and opinions helped shape those of Chase and Ethan. Schildcrout cautioned me to remember to keep the argument universalizing and inclusive of all experiences of gender and sexuality rather than minoritizing and exclusive to homosexual – or even queer – experiences. Moose, though not the victim of the bullying, was still a victim of the restrictive notions of gender and sexuality that led to the radical behavior of the victims of his bullying, and the behavior of other bullies on which the character is based.

By including Dominic and the Moose's narratives, rather than just those of the victimized lovers, in the final argument over the death of Romeo and Juliet, the conversation became the climax of the theoretical discourse the characters participated in over the course of the show. Moose is left visibly shaken for being criticized for his use of the word “fag,” which, according to Chase, he overuses to the point that it has lost all meaning, and only demonstrates the Moose's “stupid obsession with the idea that masculinity is somehow worth something.” Dominic, after remaining silent the entire play about how he actually feels about the events of the play, finally explains his lack of commitment to any side of the argument, saying “I don’t want to have to declare myself as something just so other people can think they know something about me.” Ethan reprimands Chase for his romanticization of the action of the play by saying, “Why are you glorifying teen suicide like it’s this noble thing? These people aren’t martyrs, they’re victims.” Ethan ends the argument by coming to the conclusion that I believe all of the aforementioned theory and experiences has led to:

“It’s not about ending homophobia, it’s bigger than that. You all have to stop thinking that all these polar-opposites you’ve categorized the world into actually mean anything” (Kopciak).

I am absolutely positive that the above conclusion, which I do adamantly believe to be true, could not have been reached if I had worked with an all-male cast. Given my experiences as a child and adolescent, issues of sexuality were immediately relevant and accessible to me. Working with women required me to look more deeply at how gender interacts with sexuality. I came to realize that the constructs of gender and sexuality are inextricably joined and used to justify the other. Working with women also brought to the forefront ways in which gender, and similarly sexual orientation, function as class systems. It became clear to me at the end of the process that only by dismantling both binaries could either oppressed group hope to achieve equality.

*I realized that the question I set out to explore at the beginning of this project (how does a young gay man growing up in twenty-first century America come to terms with his identity in a culture dominated by compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexual narratives?) was a minoritizing, misleading and ineffective question. By working with women to explore issues of male homosexual identity, I realized that the difficulties I faced growing up, and continue to face on a daily basis are not simply the result of a cultural bias toward male homosexual identity, but the entire matrix of gender/sexual identity in which we all exist, regardless of our adherence to norms and*

*expectations regarding ones gender and sexual orientation. To quote Ethan, I realized that “it’s not about homophobia, it’s bigger than that.”*

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