

A feminist theatre pedagogy suggests that what we do with our bodies on the stage has the potential to reverberate and transform both the artists who make the representations and the community members who witness them.¹

In March 2016, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte produced German playwright Heiner Müller's 1977 exemplar of postmodern drama, *Hamletmachine*.² Performed in the College of Arts + Architecture's 340-seat proscenium theatre and concert space, *Hamletmachine* had a significant place in a theatre season that included Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as well as a workshop musical, a concert reading of a new play by Constance Congdon, and a co-production of the stage adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* with the Children's Theatre of Charlotte. I present this essay from the position of dramaturg for this production, a role that began with framing the production as a theory-driven response to Müller's playtext. Specifically, our production of *Hamletmachine* followed a feminist pedagogical framework with the potential, as Ann Elizabeth Armstrong suggests, to "transform both the artists who make the representations and the community members who witness them" by considering "what we do with our bodies on the stage." As universities continue to place considerable value on undergraduate research across disciplines, performance faculty will be called on to design research experiences specifically for their students. Our *Hamletmachine* illustrates how framing an academic theatre production as research can elevate students' experiences from passive participation to active co-investigation.

In order to make space for many students to participate in the shaping of the production, we decentralized authority wherever possible. Specifically, non-hierarchical casting practices allowed students of different academic majors, theatre experience, and gender expressions to explore the play according to their interests. Elsewhere I have written about the value of collaborative dramaturgy in an undergraduate setting, arguing that traditional notions of dramaturg-as-expert can discourage students from attempting the practice.³ Following my own advice, I assembled a team of dramaturgs who created group-sourced research spaces, archives, and marketing pieces. In addition, students in the theatre department's introductory dramaturgy course annotated the text for the cast. The result of this team structure was a working environment that strengthened a primary aim of the production: to expose and denaturalize various structures of power that have material effects on our lives as theatre artists.

As many readers will recall, Müller's densely allusive *Hamletmachine* has no assigned roles, although most productions cast someone to play Hamlet and someone to play Ophelia. The play's dramatic action is likewise open, although themes of loss and renewal repeat; Müller has called the play "a description of a petrified hope, an effort to articulate a despair so that it can be left behind."⁴ What is not at all ambiguous is the play's structure. The play's five acts "ghost" the five acts of Shakespeare's play, the Hamlet character's earnest intellectualism and conspicuous failure-to-act serving as a metaphor for the promise (but ultimate failure) of communist ideologies to transform contemporary societies. Following Müller's cue, we critiqued other traditional structures of power, such as the genius of Shakespeare, the influence that *Hamlet* holds on literary and theatre studies, and the "lead role" that Hamlet begs in any contemporary production of the play. Far from demonstrating disdain for the play and its legacies, we also staged what felt like Müller's nostalgia for the belief or promise that "great plays," "great leaders," or "great nations" might deliver us from suffering, specifically in our interpretation of the stage direction, "*splits with the ax the heads of Marx, Lenin, Mao,*"⁵ described in more detail later in this essay.



Fig 1. Four Hamlets: Tykiique Cuthkelvin, Noah Tepper, Matt Miller, and Jennifer Huddleston. Photo by Daniel Coston

Our production's reconfiguration of authority continued with casting. To point to the cultural hegemony not only of Shakespeare's play but of the forceful singularity of the character of Hamlet, we cast every actor who auditioned, assigning four students to play Hamlet [Fig. 1] and three students to play Ophelia. Claudius was played by an actor dressed as an itinerant Russian clown who sometimes led another of our production's inventions, a seventeen-member Chorus of Dead Ophelias, all of whom carried writing plumes. Finally, one actor was cast as Gertrude and another as Horatio.⁶ All roles were cast without regard to gender. This fracturing, sharing, and multiplying of characters served our production's feminist pedagogy by positioning the characters as *subjects-in-process*, as feminist psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva terms it — questioning Freud's insistence that all of us enter irretrievably into discrete subjectivity once we acquire language.⁷

Directing professor Robin Witt decentralized the directing role as well. A team of directors (Witt and two undergraduate theatre students) rehearsed each of the five sections of the play separately, experimenting with movement vocabularies and choreographic methods drawn from pageantry, biomechanics, dance theatre, and music videos. Over a six-week rehearsal process, this 45-minute performance rehearsed on a set that resembled an abandoned drive-in movie theatre. The stage floor announced the historicity of the place, painted with large letters spelling "DÄNEMARK," while the movie screen projected the titles of each of the five sections of the play. In addition to depicting a world that was once lively but is now bereft, the set provided uninhabited spaces for the Chorus of Dead Ophelias to activate. The Ophelias portrayed mourners, witnesses, co-conspirators and partygoers; they formed a funeral procession for Hamlet's father, watched as Hamlet transformed from man to woman, and at one point overtook the space with a frenzied dance.

Despite the invention of these seventeen characters, the production's five sections closely followed the published script: 1. FAMILY SCRAPBOOK told the backstory of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, ending with a family portrait of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude and Horatio; 2. THE EUROPE OF WOMEN introduced Ophelia, "the one the river didn't keep," who, strapped to a bed, announced that she has come back in order to "take back the world I gave birth to;" 3. In SCHERZO, Ophelia returned, but in the guise of Ophelias who, in various states of committing suicide, joyously destroyed the text of *Hamlet* to the tune of the 1977 Pretenders song, "Precious" [Fig. 4]; 4. In PEST IN BUDA, one Hamlet dreamt the impending

revolution, swapping clothes with a second Ophelia; and 5. In FIERCELY ENDURING MILLENIUMS / IN FEARFUL ARMOR, a third Ophelia, bound to a wheelchair, sang a plaintive *a cappella* version of the 1977 Todd Rundgren pop ballad, “Can We Still Be Friends.”



Fig 2. Raven Monroe (in wheelchair) as an Ophelia with the Chorus of Dead Ophelias. Photo by Daniel Coston.

She then declared war on the injustices perpetrated by all patriarchal structures, stating, “Long live hate and contempt!” as the Chorus of Dead Ophelias raised their writing plumes in a quiet, collective threat of retribution. [Fig. 2]

According to Müller scholar Jonathan Kalb, *Hamletmachine*’s Hamlet and Ophelia are “victims of a common identity crisis and are allies in a common project to dismantle the representational frame of that crisis.”⁸ Müller has said: “the main character here could be Ophelia rather than Hamlet. . . . it was my intention to make Ophelia a character of equal importance.”⁹ Whereas Hamlet travels from crisis to crisis, however, the script suggests that Ophelia stays put. Hamlet speaks throughout the script; Ophelia speaks only three times, twice

in brief monologues. Responding to American director Robert Wilson's 1986 production, where a group of women moved slowly and deliberately while simply speaking the unedited text, Kalb notes that Wilson "clarified and underscored Müller's true position on authorly disappearance. . . . The text, in other words, was simultaneously obliterated and preserved as a monument," having the effect of "maximum integrity at the price of zero authority."¹⁰ Our production aimed to achieve integrity without authority as well, specifically by exposing authority's construction. Although we did this in many ways, our primary strategy was to "multiply" Ophelia, giving her more stage time, extreme freedom of movement, and a range of possible gender expressions by actors with a range of body types, ages, and attitudes toward the character.

To prepare for the athletic movement required to navigate our multi-level set (including a slanted platform accessible only by tall metal ladders), the Dead Ophelias added rehearsal skirts early in the process. Interviews conducted with each Chorus member revealed that this practice taught them not only how to climb ladders quickly while wearing a skirt, but also what it might mean to perform a gender. In interviews, the Ophelia chorus shared insights about how their skirts influenced their attitudes about the relationship of gender to power. To the question, "Do you normally wear skirts? Why or why not?" BA Theatre student Rye Latham answered, "No, not in real life, not in the Bible Belt. There's too much judgment surrounding 'feminine/masculine' clothes." To the prompt, "Tell me about a moment in rehearsal where your skirt made you realize something," Rye continued, "When I first put it on, I was worried I would just look weird because of my own personal body issues. After a while, moving around and dancing, I felt good. . . . Honestly, I felt powerful." Connecting the personal to the political, Rye continues, "I'm not ashamed to wear things girls would wear because there's nothing wrong with being a girl." Isabel Gonzalez reflected on the skirts' equalizing effect: "Everyone wearing skirts made me realize that everyone is different and people have way different styles and body shapes and that is totally okay because everyone is beautiful." And Jon Lamar, a Theatre Education student and self-described "gender-fluid individual" offered, "In this rehearsal skirt, Ophelia is breaking down the patriarchy."

As our students' responses illustrate, the choice to reflect on skirt-wearing elevated a simple rehearsal protocol to an embodied practice worthy of analysis. Since students were already mindful of the feminist potential that our cross-gender casting might have, their

reflections became findings. Anyone who has directed an academic theatre production has no doubt experienced similar awakenings in students; the subject matters, historical periods, or themes of certain plays and performances encourage students to make connections between their lives inside and outside of rehearsal. By framing such revelations as research, especially through formally collecting responses from participants, it becomes easier for performance faculty to measure and share their students' work and thus for performance fields to have impact on the growing sector of undergraduate research.

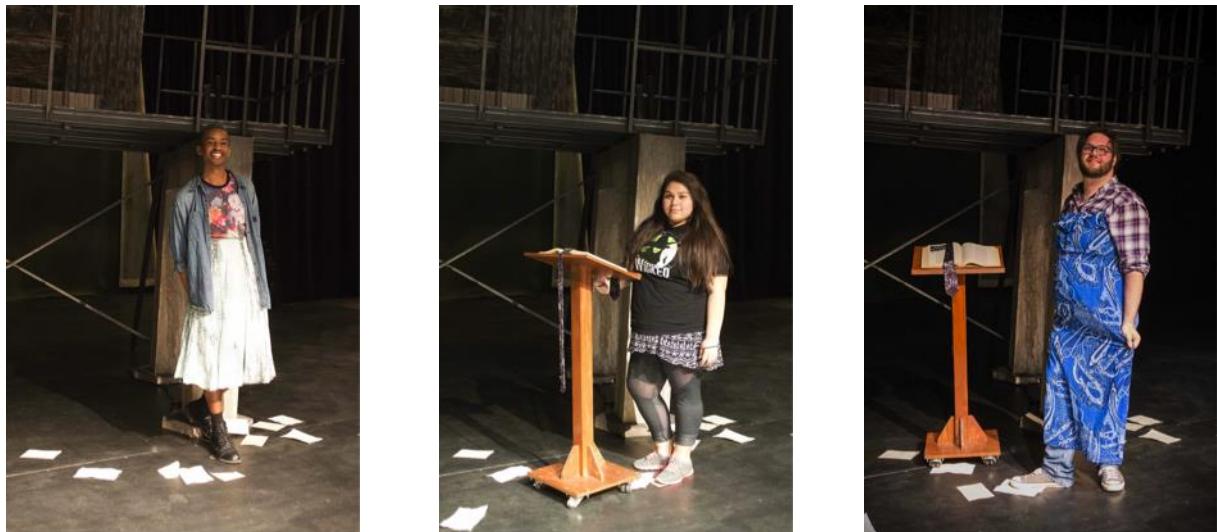


Fig 3. L-R: Rye Latham, Isabel Gonzalez, Jon Lamar. Photos by Maggie Will

The invention and animation of the Chorus of Dead Ophelias led to other significant production choices. Most important, although we performed the play text to the letter, we changed two of Müller's key stage directions that called for female nudity. We replaced Müller's call for Ophelia to perform a striptease after Hamlet announces "I want to be woman" with a simple exchange of clothing between two actors. We staged the play's climax, "He splits the heads of Communist Leaders Marx, Lenin, and Mao," but rejected Müller's stage direction that these be played by "three naked women." Instead, our puppet designer built effigies in the leaders' likenesses. To signify splitting their heads, an axe-wielding Hamlet sent the effigies into the fly space by cutting the ropes that held them. We replaced Müller's calls for three



Fig 4. The Chorus of Dead Ophelias in SCHERZO. Photo by Daniel Coston

naked women who do not speak with three unseen women who do; as the effigies rose, we played the recorded voices of three female UNC Charlotte language professors who spoke sections of Marx's "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" in Russian, German, and Chinese as Marx, Lenin, and Mao were "hanged."¹¹ This choice encouraged the audience to see the value of communist ideologies as an ongoing academic conversation, rather than a bleak statement of failure, while we also avoided casting three female actors whose sole purpose was to be killed onstage.

As art theorist Henk Borgdorff writes, "As a rule, artistic research is not hypothesis-led, but discovery-led, whereby the artist undertakes a search on the basis of intuition, guesses and hunches, and possibly stumbles across some unexpected issues or surprising questions on the way."¹² Our production of *Hamletmachine* served as a laboratory for rigorously theorized "guesses." What we at first imagined to be a simple casting principle—to cast everyone regardless of gender, look, or other outward appearance — actually welcomed Ophelia into our rehearsal room. Her presence was multiplied by the diversity of bodies, voices and genders our cast brought to her creation. This in turn turned our rehearsal room into a laboratory where

faculty and students became co-investigators who experimented with the effects of staging gender. Müller imagined *Hamletmachine* to be “about Ophelia”—it was a fortunate “guess,” then, that our feminist pedagogy, combined with the political potential of Müller’s play, created a dynamic rehearsal space where faculty and students worked together to stage the play’s feminist potential.

We have yet to measure the full impact of this production on our theatre department. In addition to the conclusions we have drawn from student participant surveys, two factors will likely emerge as significant. First, I imagine that studio research in performing gender within a production model that followed a feminist pedagogy will give our students new ways to discuss issues facing LGBTQ students and their allies. My assumption is intensified by our location in Charlotte—the largest city in North Carolina, the state that passed the now infamous House Bill 2 on March 23, 2016, one week before our opening night.¹³ A second and perhaps unexpected result of this production is its synchronicity with individual faculty members’ research. In addition to modeling artist-scholarship for our students, this production has informed our professional and scholarly work. For example, through heading the team for *Hamletmachine*, Robin Witt, a Chicago storefront theatre artist who directs the work of such post-In-Yer-Face British writers as Alistair McDowall and Simon Stephens, was able to explore the text of one of Stephens’s strongest dramatic influences.¹⁴ Scenic Design professor Tom Burch’s set for *Hamletmachine* brought his work in staging historicity to students; work he began in his professional practice in director Sean Graney’s production, *All Our Tragic*. As for me, *Hamletmachine* is one of the plays I examine in my book-in-progress. Further, collaborations with faculty across campus—from translations from the Foreign Languages department, to a post-show talk from a German Studies scholar at nearby Davidson College—increased our department’s visibility within our university and region.¹⁵ This BA theatre department production illustrates the possibility that performance fields, with their built in attention to collaboration and interdisciplinary work, can provide vibrant models for undergraduate research.

¹ Ann Elizabeth Armstrong, “Constructing a Matrix of Feminist Teaching in and with Theatre,” in *Radical Acts: Theatre and Feminist Pedagogies of Change*, ed. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong and Kathleen Juhl (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), Location 127, Kindle Edition.

² *Hamletmachine* by Heiner Müller, directed by Robin Witt, Autumn McLaughlin, and Jess Woodworth; Dramaturgy by Jeanmarie Higgins, Megan Parker, and the UNC Charlotte Theatre students; Scenic Design by Tom Burch; Lighting Design by Gordon Olson; Costume Design by Beth Killion; Sound Design by Benjamin Stickels; Puppets designed by Brittany White. Belk Theatre, UNC Charlotte, March 2016.

³ Jeanmarie Higgins, "The Youngest People in the Room: Dramaturgy in BA Theatre Programs," *Howlround*, 15 May 2016. <http://howlround.com/the-youngest-people-in-the-room-dramaturgy-in-undergraduate-theatre-programs>.

⁴ Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage*, trans. Carl Weber (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1984), 50.

⁵ Müller, 58.

⁶ Horatio was played by a puppet carved in the uncanny likeness of the 1920 Paul Klee painting, "Angelus Novus," the angel of history that became our production's guiding image.

⁷ See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

⁸ Jonathan Kalb, *The Theater of Heiner Müller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 114.

⁹ Müller, 51.

¹⁰ Kalb, 125-6.

¹¹ We are grateful to UNC Charlotte language professors Yuliya Baldwin, Bianca Potrykus, and Amanda Zhou for their translations and voice performances.

¹² Henk Borgdorff, "The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research," in *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, ed. Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 56.

¹³ David A. Graham, "North Carolina Overturns LGBT-Discrimination Bans," *The Atlantic* 24 (March 2016): Accessed 9 August 2016.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/north-carolina-lgbt-discrimination-transgender-bathrooms/475125/>.

¹⁴ Ilter, Seda. "Rethinking Play Texts in the Age of Mediatization: Simon Stephens's Pornography," *Modern Drama* 58, no. 2 (2015): 238-262.

¹⁵ Our department is grateful to Dr. Caroline Weist for her post-show talk, "Volkskörper: The Body of the People."