

Stage Directors in the Rehearsal Room:

Degendered Bodies in a Degendered Workplace*

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Introduction

The directing profession worldwide is a relatively new trend. Its current conceptualization is roughly a hundred years old. It started at the end of the nineteenth century with the advent of modern naturalism and then became a form of art at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially after the explosion of different directing practices and methods, namely methods advocated by Antonin Artaud, Constantine Stanislavski, and Bertolt Brecht, among others. Rehearsals, or the practice sessions in preparation for the performance, obtained a fundamental role in theater-making and the director was placed at the top of the theater hierarchy.

In Lebanon, the director in the “modern” sense of the term - whereby “he” is the creator of the theater performance and where all members of the production crew work under “his” supervision – emerged in the 1950s. It was in the mid 1960s that some Lebanese women, namely Latifa Multaqa and Nidal Ashqar, started to get themselves involved in the directing aspect of the theater (Said, 1998). However, the number of Lebanese women who practice theater directing is limited. According to my field research for this study and the literature review on Lebanese theater, those who have been involved in theater directing between the 1960s and today number approximately fifty directors; only nine of them are women.¹ This limited number of women in the profession raises the question as to whether gender makes a difference as far as the actualities of directing are concerned.

The Director: Blending Masculine and Feminine Qualities

Readers in the history of directing in general will notice that the first innovators in the profession of stage directing were all men such as David Garrick, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, George II (Duke of Saxe-Meiningen), Constantine Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold, etc. (see Wilson & Goldfarb, 2000). This says something about the perception of directing as a man’s job. “Director” is a gender-marked term; female directors would need to be called “women directors”. Perhaps this is because directing, as stated by Peta Tait, “is a non-traditional occupation for women in theater” (Benjamin 1994, ¶ 10). A director, Benjamin (1994) argues, “is a leader and society has been slow to see women as natural leaders, or holders of authority”, for authority and leadership are typically seen as male traits (¶ 10).

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1. For the list of names of these directors, see Assaf, S. (2005). (Appendix III).

In this sense, and in order to understand issues of gender difference in the theater, the interviewees for the study were asked about their views on the profession. Essentially, in the process of generally defining “the director”, they were defining themselves.

Most of the interviewees have cited both feminine and masculine qualities when discussing their concept of the director’s persona. The leader, the captain, the creative artist, the diplomat, and the psychologist are the images of the director that figured prominently in the interviewees’ definitions of a director. Using the image of the psychologist which is, unlike other images, usually associated with both “men” and “women”, my interviewees were highlighting the importance of shared masculine/feminine qualities in a director alongside authoritarian ones. A director is a tough person who is able to take complete charge of the production. “He should be a leader” was a phrase adopted by almost all of the directors interviewed.

Exploring my interviewees’ perceptions of the director’s persona might help explain why the job is conceived of as a man’s job, and consequently, why there is a relatively small number of Lebanese women stage directors. First, although my interviewees at certain points used what are conceived of as feminine qualities, such as being patient and tolerant, to describe a “director”, most of the other qualities deemed important for a director to possess were generally associated with the male in the Lebanese patriarchal society. Being in a leadership position, taking full responsibility both at work and at home, being able to make crucial decisions, and being strong and authoritative are qualities generally associated with the male. Second, while the interviewees often combined both masculine and feminine qualities to describe the director’s character, they constantly used the masculine pronoun “he” to refer to both male and female directors. This tells us that a director, even in the minds of the most liberal of men and women, is still being conceived of as a “male”.

Based on the above description of what a “director” is, one can propose a simple hypothesis to talk about the experience of women directors. The assumption could be that female stage directors in Lebanon challenge traditional feminine roles/attitudes and adopt traditional masculine characteristics in order to achieve success in the domain of directing. However, considering that gender is a social construct, one can assume that the “masculine” traits that the director should have are not really “masculine”; they are “human” traits that are gendered by the society. Women directors are not being more masculine or less feminine; they are just being “directors”. These assumptions will be better investigated in the next section, which will look at how the men and women interviewed experience their gender roles in the rehearsal room, and consequently, how gender gets reconstructed in the theater.

Gender Reconstruction in the Lebanese Theater Workplace

In order to understand the issue of gender differences in the rehearsal rooms of the directors interviewed for this study,² I have relied on social constructionist approaches, which, despite the variations in the disciplines and methodologies used in their respective research studies, all question the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender as based in natural or biological difference. Instead, they offer explanations of gender based on social interaction. Understanding the notion of gender as neither deeply-rooted in biology nor as an indispensable property of personality, but as a construction

2. All interviews were conducted between May 2004 and January 2005. The interviewees are: Latifa Multaqa, Siham Nasser, Issam Bou Khaled, Nicolas Daniel, Carmen Libboss, Joseph Bou Nassar, Randa Asmar, Walid Fakhreddine, Lina Abyad, Lina Saneh, Rana Najjar, Talal Jurdi, Hisham Jaber, and Nidal Ashqar. For a short biography on each, see Assaf, Sahar 2005, (Appendix II).

that runs through the interactional sphere of life, has allowed the study to free itself from the traditional dichotomous classification of masculinity and femininity.

In an essay entitled, "Doing Gender," West and Zimmerman (2002), from a symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological theoretical framework (Waters 1994), argue that gender, a basic part of identity, is a product of social interaction much more than it is a set of characteristics inherent in an individual. They contend that "the 'doing' of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production" (West & Zimmerman 2002, p. 4). Gender, according to West and Zimmerman (2002), is not something we have but something we do in social interactions, i.e., in the presence of other people. "Participants in interaction organize their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, and they are disposed to perceive the behavior of others in a similar light" (West & Zimmerman 2002, p. 4). Any type of social interaction or activity is potentially subject to "doing gender", whereby one's action is deemed accountable in terms of its appropriateness to one's gender.

Grounding aspects of the social constructionist approaches in the lived experience of Lebanese women and men directors have revealed that the theater practitioners, while doing theater, are re-doing gender and, by so doing, are minimizing the differences between men and women. For instance, responding very thoughtfully to my query about the nature of relationships in the theater, Nidal Ashqar, a pioneer Lebanese female stage director, talked about the identity of the artist as she sees it. Ashqar argues that men and women in the theater are aware of their gender identities, but there is no one who does feminine directing or masculine directing. "The artist is a person liberated from all restrictions and obstacles. In order to succeed in theater work, we should rid ourselves of all the obstacles, whether social, sectarian, or gender-based" (N. Ashqar, personal communication, January 21, 2005). Ashqar's femininity can be strongly felt in the way she sees things, but as an artist, she has more urgent concerns than worrying about how to present her femininity. "I regard men and women from the perspective of a woman; this of course distinguishes me from others, but I do not concern myself with this issue" (N. Ashqar, personal communication, January 21, 2005). What is important for Ashqar is how to deliver her message to the audience through the bodies and the voices of her actors. "If you consider the plays I have directed, you cannot tell whether this is a man's direction or a woman's direction. How can you tell? No doubt that in each one of us there is a bizarre assortment of masculinity and femininity; we bring out the qualities we need in the particular situation we are living" (N. Ashqar, personal communication, January 21, 2005). By claiming that there is an "assortment of masculinity and femininity" in each one of us, Ashqar is probably suggesting that there is no such thing as real gender. This falls within Judith Butler's (1998) concept of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an essence; it is real only to the extent that it is performed. Hence, being a "man" does not have to signify masculinity just as being a "woman" does not have to signify femininity. In other words, being male or female does not guarantee one's masculinity or femininity, respectively. Gender becomes a "free-floating artifice," using Butler's terms, as long as it is independent of sex (p. 278).

Ashqar's attitude towards the artist is reminiscent of what Lebanese director and actor Issam Bou Khaled has said about gender in the context of the theater: "There is no

difference between men and women in the theater, because in this domain, you should be neutral in order to create and give. When I am acting, I am like clay. When I am directing, I consider my actors to be like clay not only at the physical level but also at the emotional level" (I. Bou Khaled, personal communication, December 03, 2004). Comparing the artist to clay, Bou Khaled is saying that the artist is not a fixed entity but s/he is continually assuming different shapes in order to be able to become the "person" or the "character" s/he is performing. Gender, according to Bou Khaled, is one of these shapes. He stresses the importance of discovering the different human sensations in the theater. "As a man, I should learn how to feel like a woman, and the woman should learn how to be a man" (I. Bou Khaled, personal communication, December 03, 2004). Thus, we see how practicing social expressions that are not associated with one's biological sex is not only acceptable but also necessary in theater work.

However, one can conclude that stage directors, while doing a directing job, do not express their gender identity, whether it is socially labeled as masculine or as feminine. The norms, expectations, and attributes of masculine or feminine that are learned through a socialization process alter dramatically inside the theater workplace. Moreover, gender, as some constructionists have argued, is not only an act of the individual. West and Zimmerman (2002) argue that doing gender occurs in institutional arenas, from which the norms of appropriate gender are drawn. In this sense, one can argue that the specific norms of the theater institution as opposed to those of society allow theater practitioners to employ less traditional expressions of masculinity and femininity. In order to explore this assumption, the subsequent section will look at the director-actor relationship.

Degendered Bodies in a Degendered Workplace

The delicate balance and relationship achieved between the director and the actor is one of the most intriguing areas of the directing process. The questions as to how directors deal with actresses and actors and what kind of relationship they intend to build with them have revealed the importance of behaving freely and unreservedly in theater because healthy and strong relationships between the crew members come first in theater-making. Almost all of the directors interviewed, while talking about their relationship with the actors, used the term "friends" to describe this relationship.

However, it was remarkable that while discussing the importance of the director-actor friendly relationship, two themes recurred in the narratives of most of the interviewees. The first theme raised was the fragility of working with the body of the actor or actress and how that defines the relation. The second theme was the private nature of the rehearsal room.

In order to develop the friendly relation that is crucial for both the director and his/her actors, some of the directors interviewed have emphasized the value of freeing the relations in the rehearsal room from any sexual connotations. This notion shows that the existing biological differences would appear unimportant without the social construction of gender. Issam Bou Khaled, while talking about dealing with his male and female actors, said: "I treat them in the same way. From the first moment in the rehearsal room, I intend to break the sexual barrier because I know that in our work

there will be physical contact. Accordingly, I do not place myself in a male position dealing with the opposite sex. This might create a problem that might go out of control and might put us at a disadvantage at the research and imagination levels” (I. Bou Khaled, personal communication, December 03, 2004).

Theater director and script writer Hisham Jaber has also reflected on the relations in the theater workplace from the perspective of a man-woman relationship: “The relation between a man and a woman in the theater becomes relaxed. Once you are making theater, there is the game of the body, body contacts. So, if we are talking about sex, the sexual congestion will disappear. Things become more refined and spiritual” (H. Jaber, personal communication, November 25, 2004). Given that gender differences are greatly expressed in our sexual relationships, as long as relationships in the rehearsal room are stripped of sexual implications, the men and women making theater are alike. Bou Khaled and Jaber both argue that gender differences are felt less in the theater workplace.

When asked to discuss her views on the human relations in the theater workplace, theater director Lina Abyad discussed the importance of working with the body of the actor and how that defines the relation: “You cannot work with the actor while you are standing 20 meters away from him. You need to get close to him, touch him. There should be this freedom. You should feel that it is acceptable for him” (L. Abyad, personal communication, June 01, 2004). That is why as a director, she takes the first step to form a close relationship with her actors by talking about her private life, her dreams, even her sexual life. Abyad’s attitude towards the director-actor close relationship in the rehearsal room provides a typical example of how uncommon issues in society become acceptable within the context of the theater. Clearly, while open public debates about sensitive issues and very old taboos, like sexual habits, are uncommon in Lebanese society, they are perfectly acceptable in the theater workplace. The rehearsal room gives us the agency to re-define our social realities. This is more evident in the following views on the private nature of the rehearsal room.

The intimate relations that are necessary for producing a play are dictated by the private nature of the rehearsal room and the theater institution, in general. In theater, one must behave spontaneously, says Latifa Multaqa, first female director in Lebanon, because lies and artificiality are almost instantly detected: “Masks that are usually imposed by society and traditions must be dropped. Theater is freedom; it is a way of expressing oneself freely” (L. Multaqa, personal communication, May 11, 2004). Thus, the private nature of the rehearsal room seems to foster an explicitly safe environment for alternative ways of doing gender. Theater work is mainly about creating a new world, or as put by Lina Abyad, it is about “re-doing” the world or “re-saying it”. As such, in the process of re-doing the world, the theater practitioners are re-doing their gender identities and rendering the rehearsal room a degendered workplace.

Towards an Androgynous Society

Living in a gendered society that perceives men and women as different human beings who have different roles to perform, I was motivated, for the purposes of this study, to ask the following question: “How many women directors are being themselves, in other words, being feminine?” Looking at the issue from this

perspective, I was unconsciously complying with traditional feminine and masculine qualities and with the biological essentialist views of gender differences. However, as I started reading through the relevant literature, and as soon as my field research started, the focus of the study shifted to exploring how the existing gender structure affects the work of women stage directors, as well as exploring the reconstruction of gender in the rehearsal room.

The juxtaposition of the experience of women directors with their male counterparts has led to the following conclusion: Theater practitioners are redoing their gender while doing theater. In the process of doing theater, theater practitioners are, to some degree, altering the immediate social norms of gender accountability. The traditional expectations of being feminine and masculine change in the theater workplace. Hence, what it means to be male or female becomes broader than normally defined outside the rehearsal room. While doing theater, theater directors stop doing gender. They minimize the differences between men and women. They construct a world where men and women play similar roles, roles that are equally respected by others without any concern as to whether one's sex is male or female.

Borrowing from Virginia Woolf (1992), who once said that the mind of an artist must be "incandescent" and "unimpeded", one can say that theater artists are not ordinary men or women (pp. 98-99). These artists have the type of man-womanly or woman-manly mind, i.e. androgynous minds. Although they are aware of the significance of gender as a factor in influencing the roles that are played by men and women, they themselves consider gender differences neutral. This is reflected via their views on human relations in the rehearsal room. When dealing with the others' bodies as degendered bodies, they are essentially not thinking specifically about the sex of the bodies in question. As directors and actors, they need to integrate the experience and feelings of both men and women in order to reincarnate the characters they are playing on stage. Perhaps both their awareness of the artifice of difference that social customs impose and the nature of their theater work join to produce their androgynous minds.

Finally, understanding theater as a degendered place, i.e. as a place whose organizational dynamics do not reproduce gender inequality and gender differences, women and men directors are not expressing their social realities in their rehearsal rooms. An intriguing question remains: Can theater practitioners express their "theater realities" in their social lives? Can real life be a mirror of the theater world? Would that be a first step towards an androgynous society, and would that be the kind of society we want to live in?

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