

Shaking Up Shakespeare Episode 7: Towards a Feminist Hamlet

Hope Van Der Merwe: Welcome everyone to this episode of *Shaking Up Shakespeare*, the podcast where we acknowledge, investigate, and challenge Shakespeare's enduring presence on 21st-century Canadian stages. My name is Hope Van Der Merwe and I host this podcast alongside Dr. Marlis Schweitzer and Liam Lockhart Rush.

This podcast was written and recorded in Tkaronto, the traditional territory of the Anishinabe Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit. We would like to acknowledge the ways in which Shakespeare was used as a tool for colonialism and genocide, and encourage all listeners to continue to be critical of this enduring presence in so-called Canada.

Hope Van Der Merwe: In this episode, we will interrogate the sexism and gender disparity we so frequently see littered throughout Shakespeare's works. Consider this: Lady Macbeth must unsex herself in order to have the strength it is presumed only a man would to convince her husband to kill the king. She is written in a way that is a brutal display of deeply entrenched misogyny.

Samson's "and therefore women being the weaker vessels or ever thrust to the wall" and Hamlet's "frailty, thy name is woman," are blatantly sexist. Most of the roles in Shakespeare are written for and cast as men, despite the fact that an alarming majority of graduating theatre school actors are AFAB -- that is assigned female at birth and femme presenting.

Yet, by the time we get into the workforce, we find that many of our, frankly, mediocre and less hardworking male peers are dominating rehearsal spaces and stages, seemingly being rewarded for being born into and presenting as the correct gender. Why? In this episode, we will interrogate traditional casting practices as they pertain to Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, more specifically, examining the ways in which actors and directors can subvert patriarchy through gender-bent casting. We will hear from scholars like Liz Pentland, Peter Parolin, and Roberta Barker, MPhil students like Ziyana Kotadia and theatre practitioners like Allyson McMackon, Jamie Robinson, Anita La Selva, Kiera Loughran, Eli Pauley, Jeff Ho, Christine Horne, Alix Sidaris, and more.

Before we get into the body of this episode, I first would like to introduce you to my favorite feminist theorist and scholar, Sara Ahmed, whose work and ideas have informed my understanding of intersectional feminism, and as such has coloured the way this episode is shaped. I first came upon the term *feminist killjoy* -- a term with which I identify -- several years ago when I read Ahmed's book, *Living a Feminist Life*. In another of her works called *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed defines a feminist killjoy as "one who spoils the happiness of others. She's a spoil sport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness," end quote. In other words, a feminist killjoy is one who disrupts patriarchy, which often spoils the happiness of those who benefit from it. To be a feminist killjoy is to disobey, to challenge, to interrupt.

It is my intention with this episode to challenge disobey and interrupt the patriarchy embroidered into Shakespeare. I would like to invite those of you who are listening to

consider, if only for the duration of this episode, the works of Shakespeare and in particular Hamlet, through the lens of a feminist killjoy.

This podcast is after all, all about shaking up Shakespeare. First we will look at *Hamlet*. More specifically, we will examine how casting AFAB people and women into the role of *Hamlet* subverts the misogyny entrenched in many of Hamlet's lines and actions. Because those words sound wrong, coming from a non-male voice. Then we will turn to Ophelia. We will interrogate the ways in which she has been played as passive, obedient, and weak, and explore how one can play Ophelia in a way that is considered feminist. Finally we will talk about Gertrude and how similarly to Ophelia, we can present the character in a way that resists the misogyny, stitched into societal perceptions of her character.

Ziyana Kotadia: *Hamlet*

Adelaide Dolha: *Hamlet*

Jeff Ho: *Hamlet*

Hope Van Der Merwe: To be or not to be? That is the question.

Duncan Gibson-Lockhart: I think casting is huge.

I think we don't always need to see the straight white guy playing Hamlet over and over again.

Liz Pentland: You could say, well, a female Hamlet is breaking with tradition, but if you look closely at the history, we've had female Hamlet since Sarah Bernhardt in the late 19th century, right? I think it's 1896 or something like that, so the idea of casting a woman in the role doesn't necessarily do anything that hasn't been done before. What it might do is open up possibilities in particular contexts and particular spaces that are maybe resistant to that because of course casting a woman in a lead role like that makes it a star vehicle for someone like Sarah Burnhart, who's already incredibly famous in her time. Right. There's a whole book on female Hamlets. So clearly that's something that's been explored over the years. But I think there are times when we need interventions in casting to remind ourselves. I think that Shakespeare belongs to all of us and can be a play that speaks to all of us. Not just this sort of white male intellectual who's feeling disenfranchised or disillusioned with the systems of power,

Hope Van Der Merwe: Liz Pentland, who you just heard, is a professor at York University and she specializes in Renaissance literature, including Shakespeare. The book she was referencing is called *Women as Hamlet, performance and Interpretation in Theatre, film and Fiction* by Tony Howard. Given this long history of women being cast as Hamlet, why in 2023 does the prospect of a non-man playing the role seems so revolutionary and radical?

The feminist killjoy in me wants to know why the name Hamlet still conjures up the image of a 40 something year old white straight man. Despite the tradition of casting women in the

role of since Sarah Bernhardt in the 19th century, and Elizabeth Powell, who was the first woman to play the role in 1796.

Interestingly, out of everyone we spoke to when asked about their favorite Hamlet, or who they thought had a fresh take on Hamlet, the overwhelming majority answered.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: Amaka Umeh.

Liz Pentland: Amaka.

Peter Parolin: Amaka.

Jamie Robinson: Amaka.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: Amaka Umeh.

Marlis Schweitzer: Amaka Umeh.

Ziyana Kotadia: I mean, my favorite is definitely not the earliest. I just saw *Hamlet* in Stratford and that was stunning, an excellent performance.

Anita La Selva: I really loved that casting.

Liz Pentland: I actually really liked what Amaka did with Hamlet.

Peter Parolin: I thought Amaka's performance as Hamlet was wonderful.

Liz Pentland: Just the kinetic energy of that performance, which really gets away from this prevailing view of Hamlet as, you know, passive and unable to make a decision and unable to take action, which, you know, is that inheritance of Olivier that we've been living with for almost a century now. It's nice to be able to embrace a completely different reading of the character.

Jamie Robinson: I loved that she was herself and was allowed to do that.

Hope Van Der Merwe: The version of *Hamlet* that is being referenced here took place at the Stratford Festival in the summer of 2022, featuring Amaka Umeh, an AFAB Black gender queer actor in the title role. I was very interested in learning what the people I interviewed thought about how the casting of a non-binary performer as Hamlet impacted the production on a whole. In particular, I was curious to get their perspectives on how this casting challenges the patriarchy embedded in Shakespeare's words and in the play.

Ziyana Kotadia: It added a whole different layer to. The patriarchy that we can kind of see Hamlet's tongues steeped in because a lot of what Hamlet says is just blatantly sexist.

Alix Sideris: I mean, the misogyny in the play is hard. The language is hard, you know, cause it's a - the things he says about women is hard to hear as a woman.

Ziyana Kotadia: The fact that this is coming from an actor that we know is non-binary, it just, it completely changed the text for me because all of a sudden it's not. The wielding of patriarchy by someone who has access to the privileges of patriarchy and of white supremacy. It feels like a representation of the turmoil that comes from like a horrible, internalized beast inside of you that is making you feel like you need to root out the parts of you that don't align with the world's expectations of you.

Anita La Selva: I thought it was so forward thinking to have a non-binary performer playing that role. What they brought was the essence of the character and what it showed us. I think what it showed us was that it didn't matter. It doesn't matter what gender Hamlet is. Hamlet could be male, Hamlet could be female, Hamlet could be non-binary.

It's what the character is going through, and I think that's what we have to start really embracing more and more and more if Shakespeare is going to stay alive.

Liz Pentland: I think that they make us question our categories of gender. Because, you know, Hamlet is still played as a kind of male character or a character where gender ceases to matter actually. And that's one of the interesting things about her performance .

Anita La Selva: They did it beautifully. And what I loved about that performance was that they were in their body the whole time. And that was an example of taking the text inside the body.

Alix Sideris: For me, one of the favorite parts in *Hamlet* is when Hamlet removes their clothing and they talk for a little while, and then they get into their fencing clothing and it's the first time we get to see Amaka's body. I witness Amaka's body and suddenly I go, oh, complexity again around gender and assumptions. And then they put on a fencing outfit and people die on stage. And I go, "Patriarchy. Fuck, it sucks. Patriarchy is the killer of anything beautiful and lovely and kind and intimate and connected."

Ziyana Kotadia: So to me, it totally changed. I mean, the whole play of course, but especially the relationships that Hamlet and Ophelia have.

Hope Van Der Merwe: As an actor and scholar, I have a fraught relationship with Ophelia. I feel that she's written as having very little agency, but even more infuriatingly is frequently portrayed in a way that is rewarded by patriarchy. She's weak, frail, overtly and traditionally feminine. I'm intrigued by Ophelia because I want to see what would happen if she was willful. Sara Ahmed, the scholar I introduced to you at the beginning of this episode defines willfulness as, quote, "Asserting or disposed to assert one's own will against persuasion instruction or command governed by will without regard to reason, determined to take one's own way. Obstinate self-willed or perverse... perhaps willfulness could be summarized as this: not willing to be owned."

What would happen if Ophelia was indeed not willing to be owned?

Each of the people I spoke to had a myriad of thoughts on this. In this section, you will hear from award-winning directors and actors like Anita La Selva, Allyson McMackon, Christine Horne, Keira Loughran, Alix Sideris, and Eli Pauley. You will hear from scholars and theatre critics like Roberta Barker, Melissa Poll, Erin Kelly, and Peter Parolin, and MPhil students like Ziyana Kotadia, all of whom were critical of the way Ophelia has been manifested as obedient and weak-willed on Canadian stages.

Adelaide Dolha: Ophelia.

Liz Pentland: Ophelia.

Roberta Barker: Ophelia.

Alix Sideris: Ophelia.

Hope Van Der Merwe: A soiled dove.

Erin Kelly: Innocent - mentally on edge

Peter Kuling: Crazy.

Ziyana Kotadia: Ophelia is written as a passive character.

Erin Kelly: I want a strong take on Ophelia.

Peter Kuling: I didn't appreciate Ophelia at the Stratford Festival this summer coming out in what I call the standard crazy woman's gown from a hospital.

Ziyana Kotadia: It's bothered me that she all of a sudden seems to lose her grasp on reality.

Erin Kelly: I've seen Ophelias who seemed kind of mentally on edge and about to fall apart from the very beginning.

Ziyana Kotadia: She's written as a character that embodies a lot of the ideals of femininity that probably would've been held up as a standard at that time.

Erin Kelly: I've seen Ophelias who are very innocent and sweet and pretty and get crushed because they are basically a butterfly and in a blender.

Eli Pauley: Why did Ophelia not get to speak and everyone else does?

Keira Loughran: Ophelia's kind of never really interested me, in the journey that's portrayed within that play.

Ziyana Kotadia: But when you have an actor that grapples with that and imbues their own lived experience into the way that they engage with those ideas, that can be super subversive and really powerful.

Peter Kuling: I think I'd wanna find a way to renew Ophelia somehow. There needs to be something more with that character that doesn't just turn into hey nonny nonny's and flowers and all this sort of stuff.

Anita La Selva: What if Ophelia had more agency? What if she was, what if we looked at Ophelia as, as we would a modern day teenager and looked at kind of the angst that teenagers go through, the anxiety, the, this, the, that, the potentially suicidal thoughts that then what are, what pushes her over the edge?

Allyson McMackon: I think there's a lot stronger, and by stronger, I mean more compelling choices than just that obvious. We can see the pre-Raphaelite Ophelia all we want, you know, which is very beautiful. But there's other ways as well. All of, you know, all of us have that in us.

All of us have, have that character in us. Ophelia is an archetype.

Jeff Ho: I'm Jeff Ho. I use he/him pronouns and I played Ophelia in *Prince Hamlet*.

Trying to crack Ophelia is tough because the track is very unique, or not unique, but like quite a few roles for women in Shakespeare's canon. They have a lot to do in Act one, the first three acts and then they kind of disappear like Lady M as well, and then they come back and then there's no real bridge between how they operate in the first half of the narrative and then how they go mad. So there's a lot of imagination to fill in that and a lot for our production or director and the collaborators to make it work.

Anita La Selva: There's a lot of great Shakespeare roles, there's a lot of great language that so many young actors want to explore and want to perform and have spent arduous amounts of time studying and learning and, really delving into. And then they come out, particularly women, and there's nothing for them. And if they don't fit that little box of the ingénue, then they're "SOL," you know, until they're 50. And then even then they don't get the roles because all the women who've been playing the ingenue roles when they were 20, they're all playing the roles. I mean, I've always threatened to be, to start an all female Shakespeare company in this city. I don't know why I haven't, but that's something I've always been sort of threatening to do. Maybe I should do it now.

Allyson McMackon: Very few female directors handle Shakespeare. There's very few at the helm of these works. It remains a male vision and we know the difference when there isn't a male voice at the helm. We do know the difference. You know? So I think how would we handle that? We get more, more women and female identifying people directing. You know, we get more free and less afraid.

Christine Horne: I think often the way that we give women or anybody who's not just like a straight white guy, a part in Shakespeare, is to like, give them the parts of the straight white guys.

Anita La Selva: More men or male presenting actors are automatically invited into the club just because there are more roles written for male presenting folk, and less women are and The women have just been saying, let's - or female presenting - let us in. We want, we want more. I mean, I think now is a time when we can be more progressive about it. And I think that, you know, we may see more of that.

Allyson McMackon: You know, because again, those, I think those cliches and stereotypes, they also come up because of the power structure that's in the room, which is about the way to do it, as opposed to how can it be done. And so, you know, if we come in with these predeterminations about what this should be, we're screwed. Don't do it for real. Go for the cliché. Go for the stereotype. Don't actually explore gender. Don't actually explore what that intersection is for yourself. And it's interesting too, cause it boils down to the director and then it also does boil down to the actor. So again, the director can have the best of intentions and be trying to push it and guide it in a certain direction. And if the actor won't meet them or won't meet it, the work on some level, then it's really problematic.

And it's tricky because the notions of are they empowered? Are they not empowered? Are they autonomous or are they not? If we actually look at the scenes and we actually look at what's going on between the characters, I think we'll find that everybody's pretty empowered. It's a choice of whether we're willing to, as the artist, as the actress, the director, as the company, take that on and where's that gonna lead us? I mean, that's a big journey for that character of Ophelia, to have the love of their life transformed in front of their eyes, to be the recipient of that language and that hostility and that shift that happens in that antic disposition. To deal with the voices of your father, your brothers, again the female presence in that family structure. Very limited. So who is that individual?

Melissa Poll: My feminist Hamlet would be a female Hamlet. You know what I mean? Like Hamlet would be played by a woman and all the other characters could be played by women too.

Roberta Barker: There are a lot of ways in which one has to play against the grain of the text in which one has to resist the text.

Anita La Selva: I saw a fast, one of the best productions of *Hamlet* I've ever seen was an interpretation of *Hamlet* done in Spanish by the Teatro de los Andes out of Bolivia. And they came here to Canada to the Pan American Roots Festival a number of years ago, and they had their version of *Hamlet* and they did it with like, I don't know, maybe eight actors max. And they just pared it down to the bare essentials. And that Ophelia was a woman and how they did the drowning scene is like they had a bucket and she just literally stuck her head in a bucket.

And she was so, - and she played it as a young, sort of, that young kind of angsty woman. And she was so anxious that she was like, I can't, I can't. And she would almost do this, like testing herself and then she would pull herself up and test herself. And then at the end, she

drowned. But it was deliberate and it was such a strong act and it was such a strong statement that I found it devastating. Whereas I've always found like, oh, what happened to Sweet Ophelia kind of thing before. But in that production, she had agency and that was basically created by an ensemble.

Melissa Poll: But I think, I don't know, would there be a way to not have Ophelia kill herself. You know, is it, is it an Ophelia that's more like a Nora who walks out the door at the end and chooses to empower herself and, you know, could Gertrude be the one who killed her husband and not Claudius, because she was getting tired of him?

Liz Pentland: Gertrude.

Keira Loughran: Gertrude.

Melissa Poll: Gertrude.

Hope Van Der Merwe: What happened to Gertrude? Unlike Ophelia or Claudius or Hamlet, or anyone else in this particular tragedy, I have never felt any kind of connection with Gertrude. I don't think about her at all. She has been presented to me as so completely forgettable, disloyal, and frankly irritating. Like Ophelia, I feel that she is rarely played with any strength or agency, which makes her incredibly unsympathetic to an audience.

What would happen if she was played in such a way that undermined the male gaze through which she was written and through which she is often directed and performed.

Alix Sideris: In *Hamlet*, you know, you really have a question mark around Gertrude.

Anita La Selva: I mean, Gertrude is complex because on the one hand we see this huge love for her Hamlet, right, for her child.

Keira Loughran: Gertrude is also underdeveloped, I think, in context of what she goes through.

Anita La Selva: And, and there's this huge complex love and there's that, you know, one amazing seat that they have together. Hamlet, mother, you know, that beautiful, how that scene begins.

Erin Kelly: I wanna see a really amazingly well thought-out Gertrude.

Alix Sideris: Oftentimes she's played to be, you know, quite weak and oftentimes she's super sexualized. You know, there's so many Freudian versions of like, what their relationship is, which I really appreciate when folks don't go that route. I think it was an interesting little experiment for a while because it was a hot topic, but in the end it's just like, there are nuances and complexities to familial relationships because of where we are today in our, in our questioning and our relationship to all that. It really makes a comment about the patriarch, it makes a comment, points to the language when it's misogynist.

Anita La Selva: But I think oftentimes she's seen as a pawn and I feel it would be really interesting. If she chose to marry Claudius for political reasons, more so than, oh, I fell in love with my husband's brother, which feels so weak woman.

Whereas if she is a woman whose husband has been murdered for political reasons, then she could be in trouble, right? And where is her life? Where is her son? What's she doing? So I would be really interested in seeing a Gertrude that was much smarter and did this marriage to Claudius as a political move. And what would happen if she were, cause you know, this whole *Hamlet* is all about play acting. Like, what if her whole marriage to Claudius was a part of her own political scheme? To stay in power, to stay safe, just to maintain what she's got.

I don't know. Would that make her more ruthless or would that make her a survivor? I don't know, but sometimes just being this kind of pawn and then, I think the tragedy would be even more profound because Hamlet thinks that she's, that she's just fallen for Claudius when in fact she has done it to protect her son, right? I mean, if I were playing her as an actor, I would fight for her to be almost desperate after her husband died. And what do I have to do? Okay. I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna do this for my survival and my son's survival.

Hope Van Der Merwe: This concludes our episode for today. I hope that through this episode, you were able to embrace the feminist killjoys in each of you, and imagine a future in which Shakespeare and *Hamlet* more specifically is not dominated by the visions and presence of white cis-het men. After speaking with each of the artists included in this episode and this podcast, I think we can all agree there is a need for more inclusive, equitable, and innovative casting practices aimed at decentering patriarchy and whiteness in Shakespeare and in theatre more broadly.

Even the way in which Shakespeare is taught in theatre schools reinforces the cis-hetero patriarchy I and many other artists long to break away from. In iambic pentameter, when a line has 11 beats, it is referred to as a feminine ending because it is a quote unquote “weak line.” One that is filled with so much emotion it spills out over the standard 10 beats iambic pentameter is famous for. However, an ending that is standard -- that is an ending that falls within the perimeters of iambic pentameter -- is referred to as strong and masculine. This association of feminine with weak and masculine with strong. Even in the way we are taught to perform Shakespeare informs what we believe about ourselves and about the world, the stories we tell ourselves shape our beliefs and our actions.

We will discuss this much more in depth in the next episode called “Crippling Shakespeare.” Thank you so much for listening to this episode, and I hope you will join me next week for the next episode of

Liam/Hope/Marlis: *Shaking up Shakespeare.*

Marlis Schweitzer: This podcast is part of *Resetting the Stage*, a five year project that seeks to situate debates about theatrical representation and the politics of casting in Canada within a broad historical context, advancing dialogue with directors, playwrights, actors, educators, students, and other creators who are actively transforming professional Canadian theatre and university level theatre training.

For more information on other aspects of the project, please visit castingcanadiantheatre.ca. Interviews for this podcast were conducted by Marlis Schweitzer, Jeff Ho, Liam Lockhart-Rush, and Hope Van Der Merwe. All episodes written and edited by Marlis, Liam, and Hope, with dramaturgical input from Jeff. Sound mixing and levels by Maddie Batista. ASL Translation by Dawn Jani Birley. Original Music by Faith Andrew. Special thanks to Charles Ketchabaw and Will Innes at FIXT POINT for support with training, development, audio equipment, and software.

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Thanks for listening to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*.