

Conversation Piece: Gender Trouble in Devised Performance

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the making of Conversation Piece, produced in spring 2022 with first-year students of the Drama and Contemporary Performance programme at Manchester Metropolitan University, a devised performance directed by the author. The piece, initiated by the group's passionate engagement with identity politics, blended original verbatim texts, generated by the students from a series of interviews, with extracts of extant plays. My intention was to confront and explore radical shifts in the ways we consider gender, subjectivity, and language, and present our findings to a contemporary audience. The chapter examines the ways we navigated this complex territory, the dramaturgical shape and structure we devised for the material—and—and the insights we gained into our ability to think, act, speak and feel in 2022.

The first year of Manchester Metropolitan University's undergraduate programme, Drama and Contemporary Performance (DCP), culminates in a public-facing, assessed performance project. As its director in the spring of 2022, I had the choice of working with a published play—always a tricky proposition when the group size (in this case, eighteen) outnumbers a typical cast—or making a devised piece. Going for the latter option, I saw an opportunity to explore issues some of the group had raised, outside of this context, in the DCP forum dedicated to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). My decision to put identity politics at the heart of their performance practice was due, in part, to the make-up of the group: the proportion of students within it identifying as gay, genderqueer, transgender or nonbinary far exceeded UK statistics (see Morgenroth and Ryan, 2022, p. 1113). Could their subjective experience somehow generate material for devised performance?

THE CONTEXT

The central theme spoke to my own interest, as a white, middle-aged, cis gay male, in shifting views of gender, traditionally perceived as binary and oppositional, and as allied to biological sex. Change is apparent now in 'the growing visibility of, and support for, transgender and nonbinary individuals [...], discussion and implementation of gender-inclusive language [...], and related changes to policy and practice' (Morgenroth and Ryan, 2022, p. 1114). Of course, theatre and performance practice has frequently set out to expose gender bias; I wanted to acknowledge and assimilate practitioners whose work has, both directly and tangentially, activated the interrogation of deeply imbedded, and increasingly unstable, binaries. Today, divergences of opinion among the various factions invested in the debate imply both reluctance and determination to find a satisfactory consensus. Discussions within my own, putatively liberal, society, have for instance expressed 'confusion' and/or disinclination to use the terms 'imposed' by gender-inclusive language. Reactionary attitudes, consciously or not, have sustained a gap that cannot be excused as merely 'generational': I have seen, on both sides, stubborn foreclosure of

instructive, inclusive discourse. What I sought to promote, more than anything else, was *dialogue*. This article sets out to discuss the project by dividing the making process, from conception to completion, into three sections. These explain my intentions and chief strategies for the project as conveyed to the students, detail the issues we negotiated through rehearsal, and explain the dramaturgical structure conceived for the material.

THE PROPOSAL

The interpretation of performance practice as apposite territory for academic inquiry is nothing new: the project was conceived as a means of looking at the challenges to normative classification proposed by Judith Butler (1990), specifically ‘concepts of *gender performativity* (i.e., that gender is created through its own performance) and *gender trouble* (i.e., ways to challenge the performative, reinforcing cycle of the gender/sex binary)’ (Morgenroth and Ryan, 2022, p. 1113). I had in mind the development of devising practice that broke open the metaphorical conception of ‘performance’ proposed by Butler and Goffman (1959), wherein:

binary views of gender/sex are created and reinforced through the performance of gender/sex in which there is an alignment between character (man vs. woman), costume (body and appearance), and script (gendered behavior, traits, and preferences); this performance is highlighted by a stage set up to facilitate performance in line with the gender/sex binary and obfuscate performance that does not fit.(Morgenroth and Ryan, 2022, p. 1114)

Employing the analogic terms above (character, costume, script, and performance) in a literal sense, with a view to ‘facilitate performance that does not fit’—i.e., that seeks to warp the ‘alignments’ listed—I proposed two principal strategies: the project would blend original verbatim texts, generated by the students, with extracts of extant plays. Taken from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, the plays would be canonical, and lesser-known contemporary works that explore gender and identity; some that deal with concomitant issues head-on, such as Caryl Churchill’s seminal *Top Girls* (1982); others that have been

reappraised through a feminist lens, as evidenced in recent adaptations of *Medea* (see Bartlett, 2012). The selection, and sequence of these extracts was not fixed at the outset or intended to be chronological or hierarchical; the disharmony of juxtaposition would compel the students, and their audience, to recognise thematic resonances in the texts, potentially granting spectators some agency in connecting disparate fragments (or not). This dramaturgical strategy would ask: What happens, what can we take from the collision, when, for instance, the landmark moment of Nora's departure in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) is placed alongside, say, Clare Dowie's gender-queer monologue *Drag Act* (1993)?

The pre-existing texts would be threaded through verbatim material generated by the students through discussions arising from the project. This element concerned the status of *their* identity, *their* subject-position in response to historical and current debates. The inclusion of published material meant to reveal precedents—and limitations—in the ways the (western) dramatic canon could be seen to anticipate or represent the status-quo (or, specifically, the students' lived experience of it). Approaching this hazardous terrain, I was guided by Iain Mackenzie, reader in politics at the University of Kent, UK, whose pedagogic practice has explored the nexus of issues at the heart of contemporary debates about identity politics. The name of Mackenzie's 2022 elective module became the project's working title:

Who do you think you are?

According to Mackenzie, the question can be read in two ways: as an appeal to examine the conditions of our subjectivity, and/or a judgement upon a subject's ability to act/speak/feel etc. Put another way, there are two strands to the inquiry: 'what are the conditions of our identity, and how do these relate to differences between us?', and 'what is the nature of judgement and when, if ever, is it legitimate to judge others?' While the coexistence of dramatic material might address or contradict them, students' responses to those questions would become the core texts within the piece. There would be a place for everyone within this conversation, regardless of their position within, and extent of their connection to the debates it may spark; *all* voices were to be welcomed and valued.

The students were given an introductory seminar outlining the core

critical issues surrounding verbatim theatre and the various strategies used in its production (see Taylor, 2011; Martin, 2008). In common with playwrights such as Alecky Blythe (see, for example, *Our Generation* (2022), *Little Revolution* (2014)), we would generate material by recording, editing, and transcribing a series of interviews. Therefore, we required suitable *questions*. At the outset, I envisaged producing a set of around ten of these to be used as a basis for conversation. The process seems simple enough when summarised as a list of instructions: (a) find the questions as a group; (b) set up one-on-one interviews, using those questions; (c) record interview; (d) reverse roles, record again; (e) edit and transcribe the material, thus creating a script.

The practice would ignite when transcribed interviews were passed to other pairs of students to perform, thus replacing the originators of the text. The transition of verbatim text into its new status as 'script' is dependent on such an exchange: I explained the crux of verbatim practice as being the act of *performing others' words*. While actors' fidelity to the source, i.e., the utterances of the original speaker(s), is essential, authenticity functions in tension with the degree of performative interpretation involved that potentially undermines the 'truth-claims' made of the form. The troubling paradox implied here—the uneasy tryst between accuracy and artifice—and the ethical dilemmas that inevitably ensue are central themes in critical discourses surrounding the genre. The students, then, would be placed in an environment asking them to manage both verbatim *and* dramatic text, seeking perceptible contrasts in their interpretation of heightened, fictional material, versus the hyper-realistic delivery typically required of verbatim performance.

There was a third element to the research phase: I thought it essential that contemporary discourse intersected with the broader cultural landscape, and that we acknowledged its socio-historical context. A strand of verbatim practice combines several, divergent voices, finding that dialectical opposition problematises whatever subject is in hand, reveals its complexities and negates the predominance of any one point of view (see, for example, Robin Soans' *Talking to Terrorists* (2005)). To this end, I had gathered a selection of recorded interviews with prominent figures in culture and entertainment whose protestations correspond with the core themes of the project, including, for example, academic and broadcaster

Germaine Greer. At the planning stage, before I knew what the piece needed to be, it seemed important to acknowledge the currency of fame, in the sense that it bestows disproportionate power and influence on a relatively small number of individuals whose opinions will likely set the agenda and tone of the zeitgeist. I invited students to offer alternatives: there would be, perhaps, high-profile influencers on social media platforms I knew nothing about. We would develop our own practice with reference to archival sources, assessing the ways more recent (and, by implication, enlightened) discourse is redefining the terms and concepts, such as ‘cancel culture’, encountered therein. I envisaged that students would select and perform useful extracts, adding another layer to the multidimensional conversation.

THE PROCESS

The students requested that we prepare for rehearsal by stating our pronouns, and inviting discussion about them, an exercise I would recommend using in any appropriate teaching environment (see Olliff, 2001) as it signals the accumulative harm of mis-gendering individuals and, as in this case, can reveal the complexities involved in making the transition from cis to nonbinary or transgender identities, a process some referred to as ‘coming out’. My understanding of coming out has (or had?) different connotations—the significant shift being that the phrase no longer pertains exclusively to one’s sexuality—but I found affinities in students’ articulation of their experience. The cis students, too, recognised the pressures of conforming—or choosing *not* to conform—to gender-inscribed parameters, conditions exacerbated, inevitably, by their fidelity to social media. Seeming to demonstrate the group’s trust in each other, and the project, the session gradually admitted a generous measure of reciprocal candour, extended to more than two hours, and evinced so many fascinating stories that, as a verbatim practitioner, I wanted to kick myself for not having recorded it. Yet the impulse to turn subjective experience into potential material has an exploitative edge—and who can say how the presence of a recording device might have swayed or inhibited the discussion?

The session was useful in establishing a safe working space, not only in a general sense but in developing the level of trust and frankness evident in the many exchanges that became raw material for verbatim text. I gave students autonomy in coming up with interview

questions that would invite subjective responses and acknowledge both the theatrical context and wider social framework of the conversation. The illustrative script included later in this article lists the final selection of questions, and examples of answers, filtered from the recordings made in and outside rehearsals over a two-week period. Participants gave prior consent to using their interviews on the proviso that none of the material used would be ascribed to any individual and could be withdrawn at their behest, at any time.

On this basis, a few of the students voluntarily took their search for subjects outside of the group, speaking to friends in the transgender community; I was encouraged by their enterprise and keen to use parts of these recordings, but although the group had conceded to performing each other's words (and knew speakers' anonymity would be preserved), they seriously doubted the ethical integrity of, as they put it, 'speaking for' transgender individuals. One member of the group felt 'sick with worry' at the notion of representing experience they had not lived or expressing a subject-position they did not feel qualified to inhabit. Although their introductory seminar had made explicit reference to ethical concerns concomitant with verbatim practice, there is a significant difference, of course, between theoretical understanding of, and personal encounter with such a quandary. It seemed to me they'd inadvertently hierarchised the sanctity of veracity as applied to certain *kinds* of identity: to 'play straight' is safer, after all. Their concern released a sense of unease that began to permeate the group and cast doubt upon the themes and methodologies of the entire project.

Alarm bells pealing at the mid-way stage were amplified by an episode involving a notorious television news interview with Germaine Greer (2015). In it, Greer repeats unequivocal refusal to accept 'postoperative transgender men' as 'women', a hugely controversial stance that led to one of the first high-profile instances, in the UK, of 'cancelation'. I wanted this significant precedent included in the piece somehow, but my decision to broadcast Greer in rehearsal was so incendiary that it almost derailed the project. As had been the case with transgender interviewees, the students could not accept that in *performing* those words they didn't need to concur with them (they would be *quoting* Germaine Greer), any more than an actor playing Medea should consider infanticide an expedient means of revenge. Yet I had been careless in showing the material without fully preparing

them for its capacity to offend and underestimated their reluctance to give any kind of platform to views that have been judged as transphobic. As previously stated, I had started out with the aim of setting their self-generated material within or against globally influential voices, holding the view that to include only 'enlightened' and inclusive perspectives would be to imply that the battle had already been won; arguably, if there were no resistance to any aspect of identity politics, there would be no further need for protest. We don't yet live in that world. It could have been that the piece revealed not only how far we have come, but how much is still left to be achieved.

On the other hand, the dramatic material already offered us striking divergences from the students' material. Perhaps because they were so personally invested in the verbatim work, secondary sources seemed invasive; they weren't about to admit gatecrashers. In any case I was disinclined to wade against a tide of resistance; the archival interview material was no longer so essential to the process that it needed to be included. That Greer had been 'cancelled' again seemed at best an ironic outcome to me (her widely acknowledged contribution to progressive gender politics notwithstanding) but the confrontation proved to be a galvanizing moment. I saw that much of the group's agitation (and mine?) stemmed from uncertainty about the direction of the project. One of the pitfalls—or advantages, depending on your situation—of devising practice is that it takes time for a tangible structure to emerge. We were back on track as soon as I came up with a robust framework and plan for staging the work, and the title of the performance: *Conversation Piece*.

THE PERFORMANCE

Conversation Piece functioned as a mechanism through which pairs of performers, placed either end of tables large enough to seat four spectators, took the roles of interviewer/interviewee, switching between those tasks through the course of the show. The space was set up to accommodate nine tables around which the action revolved, generating an intimate relationship between performer and spectator. While the audience retained a fixed position, performers moved at timed intervals (imagine a version of musical chairs), so that any one table encountered up to four different pairings and heard alternative responses to the same questions.

Each performer had prepared a full interview comprised of extracts they'd selected from transcripts made by every member of the group; so, while it appeared to the audience that individuals were coming up with their own answers to each question, they were in fact quoting several of the students' original statements. The trick, in performance, was to create the illusion of spontaneity. The script below reveals the full list of questions we selected and illustrates, for the purpose of this article, the way some answers were recorded, retaining the authentic, informal rhythms and hesitations of everyday speech:

What are your pronouns?

Where is 'home'?

What's your first memory as a boy/girl?

Just, like, playing 'dress up'. I went round my mate's house and, like, trying on those little shitty kiddy heels that would break, and you'd break your little ankles, and then try and trot along... and um, I had an Aurora Sleeping Beauty princess dress, and my mate probably had Belle or Cinderella, and we wore tiaras in our hair, and then whenever I'd go to Spain I'd get one of those, um, you know, the polka dot dresses, I just had a lot of .dresses and that was my first, like, stereotypical memory as a girl, playing dress up with barbie dolls and princess dolls and stuff.

When did you become self-aware?

11 or 12, I think. I sort of realised how I was perceived. I think puberty is like a big part of that, going to high school; like, before that I just kind of did what I want, cos I was a kid, and kids do whatever they want, but in high school I sort of realised: 'Oh, I haven't been acting socially acceptable, I need to change that.'

Are the mind and body separate?

Do you think gender identity is influenced by the way you're raised?

Yes. I don't know if it's possible to have an 'un-gendered'

experience of the world. I think every single one of our experiences are coloured by our gender ... and the way we've been treated will never be detached from ... the gender we were assigned at birth. So ... yeah.

Are 'labels' important/useful?

I don't know. Um... I don't think there's a need to label everything... I don't know. I don't feel like anybody needs a label... I think they're useful if you understand it, it's when you don't understand it creates—not a *problem*, it creates uncertainty in the person that doesn't understand it, and then you struggle to find the right words or whatever so—I don't know, if it makes somebody feel happy that's fine, but I wouldn't like to feel as though I'd insulted somebody by unintentionally not knowing I'd done that.

Do you show who you are on the inside through what you wear on the outside?

I think I try my best but, on the inside, in terms of like, in my mind, I don't even think I'm like, human? Like, when I was little, I thought I was a vampire or an alien or something, I think I'm like, just a *being*. I think it fluctuates a lot, so I don't think it's one of those things that I can properly express in the body that I'm in. I like to say I want to be as close to a haunted Victorian doll as I can, and I think that's like the closest I can get to it.

Will the terms 'male' and 'female' become obsolete?

What gives you purpose?

What is love (to you)?

I think the fact that people say stuff like family love is unconditional, as in, like, your family is meant to love you no matter what, it's absolute bullshit, cos that's not how all families work, like whatever, it's like, half the time that's not the case, and it's a hard thing to describe 'love' because it's a thing that's different for every individual; you will have a

different concept or definition of love than I will.

Are we defined by our relationships with others?

What's your personal utopia?

How do you think people should lead their lives?

Do we carry the weight of history on our shoulders?

(Sighs) I don't know, you're bogged down with it, aren't you? You get into conversations with people, and they say 'well, in my day', and you're like... 'well you're *not* in your day—this is a *new* day.' I get frustrated with that, so, yeah, I think some people try—whether they do it intentionally, I don't know—but they try to justify things by it being 'in their day', and they're not moving with the times, and yet they move with the times with everything else.

What is 'cancel culture' and how does it work?

I despise it, I think it's *horrific*, it's like, it's from, it's come from social media, um, and it's when you don't allow any room for growth and once somebody does one bad thing and if it gains enough traction, if enough people jump on this bandwagon then they're just done, *gone*, but I don't really agree with it, I don't really think it's very healthy... surely what we should be doing is, these people that fuck up and say the wrong thing, they're hurting people, that needs to be acknowledged, that needs to be corrected, we should be implementing *education*, and finding out why they're apologising and why they've been cancelled, and education is so important in terms of that, yeah.

Are we able to have this conversation because we're privileged?

Is this a suitable conversation for performance in a theatre?

I think so, I think if it's handled delicately and done well. I think it has the potential to *not* be done well.

One of the appreciable outcomes of this approach was its aptitude for causing 'gender trouble' when, for instance, a cis male performer,

quoting the utterances of a cis female, is obliged to adopt her pronoun during his interview, without so much as a flicker of acknowledgment that his identity has changed—and back again, when he answers the next question. In such moments, we severed the alliance between character (man vs. woman), costume (body and appearance), and script, since his delivery is consistent regardless of the gender apparently assigned to him by the text. The spectator is prompted to adjust their gaze, to look more quizzically at the speaker, at his outward allegiance to ‘male’ signification, and see it as constructed: as enshrined within, and expressed through coded signifying systems.

The play texts were integrated in such a way that they sprang, apparently randomly, from conversations happening at the tables. Cued by an action, or question, the performers involved, in pairs or small groups, initiated a seamless transition from one species of text to another by keeping the same register in their delivery, progressively drawing attention to the moment as distinct from the verbatim material through *gradual* transformation into character. The point here was to instigate a ripple effect whereby dramatic action spread from an isolated table (and its audience of four) into the spaces between the tables allocated to ‘dramatic’ sequences. By then, the scene was fully inhabited, and the entire audience turned their gaze to this new point of focus. The other performers feigned a similar course, in their response, from surprise into gradual awareness, pausing their conversations to become observers.

We had time, within the hour-long duration of the show, for six of these interventions, using *Medea*, *A Doll's House*, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Hampton, 1985), *Drag Act* and *Confirmation* (Thorpe, 2014). The strategy steered the piece into ‘gender trouble’ in two ways. Firstly, through the text itself: for example, emerging as it did from the contemporary (verbatim) dialogues happening around the scene, Torvald’s belittlement of Nora in Simon Stephens’ adaptation of *A Doll's House* (2012) was thrown into harsh relief, seeming even more absurdly patriarchal. Secondly, by making disruptive casting decisions: Ibsen’s well-known work was defamiliarized by distributing the final scene among four performers, Torvald played by a cis man and cis female, Nora by a gay man and cis female. Marquise de Merteuil’s speech in 1:4 of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* was performed by a bewigged gay man, in full period costume, using his first language, Spanish while a cis woman simultaneously translated the text into its

original English stage adaptation. These examples demonstrate:

the potential for disruption and subversion through what Butler (1990) calls “repeated reconfiguration.” If gender/sex is repeatedly performed in ways that make the alignment of character, costume, and script impossible—or at least more difficult—the gender/sex binary should, over time, become less and less convincing and lose its regulatory power. (Morgenroth and Ryan, 2022, p. 1124)

I would not be so glib as to suggest that *Conversation Piece*, as a piece of devised undergraduate theatre, brought about the radical societal shift suggested above, but would argue that it dislodged the fixity of ‘regulations’ in performance, since neither the verbatim nor dramatic material exhibited consistent faithfulness to the gender identities prescribed by the texts. Through a converse realisation of Butler and Goffman’s analogy, the piece asked its audience to consider the gender/sex binary in operation outside the theatre by inviting them into an intimate encounter with contrary performative strategies at play through the duration of the piece.

If audience responses, gathered from informal post-show discussion with parents, colleagues, students and guests, can be taken as a measure of success, the strategies worked. For instance, spectators within my age-group reported having gained awareness and appreciation of the problematic assimilation of gender-inclusive language. If the insights gained meant they’d hesitate before defaulting to habitual apprehension, or dismissal of unfamiliar terms, then we had gone some way towards instigating intergenerational dialogue. As it transpired, I took for granted the group’s agreement that, espousing the verbatim practice outlined earlier, the project called for intervention of contradictory, often controversial opinions, holding fast—until the group’s objections loosened my grip—to the belief that articulation of your own position is augmented by confrontation with oppositional perspectives. While I maintain the view that the complexity of *Conversation Piece* could have been deepened by inclusion of voices from outside the student community, I have to concede that the rehearsal process was congested with ideas, and the group’s strident dismissal of archival material stemmed, at least in part, from insecurity about the direction and format of the project at a certain stage of its development. The reward for such a compromise was ultimately given

in the students' confident ownership of the performance. I came to realise that in order to adapt to change, it can be necessary to listen, at least, to the calls of those most invested making the changes. *Conversation Piece* stands, I think, as a valid contribution to the promotion of ongoing dialogue within contemporary identity politics.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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