

How much freedom does a performer have?

The history of drama and theatre is a vast and rich one, but can it be posited that for a significant period of time, the actors have not been the main focus, playing second fiddle to the writer's text and the theatrical conventions of the time? As a woman, I'm aware of this restriction even more, knowing that the industry in which I want to make my career in, so often dictates size, weight and appearance. This is of course a time when women are permitted to act, following many periods when they weren't even allowed onto the stage, but even now, how much freedom does an actor actually have? In order to explore this topic, I will focus on key periods of Western theatre; the origins of theatre in Ancient Greece, the flourishing of drama and theatre in Elizabethan times and finally, analysing work from the last 20 years. It goes without saying that within the word count I have, this will in no way be an exhaustive study, however, I do believe that it will raise some interesting questions and lead to potential further study. Similarly, writers have often battled with finding and writing in their own specific way and creating their unique voice onstage. Even now, hearing an actor add a pause or an "um" when I, as the writer, purposefully haven't written one, is incredibly frustrating, but this must pale into comparison.

The Greek plays that we have come to know today took place in The Great Dionysia¹ in 5th century BC Athens and in other festivals. "The new democracy allowed playwrights unparalleled freedom of expression...furthermore the festival was democratic...5th century Athenian drama was performed by the people for the people"². Greek drama is often considered very formal, highly stylised and bound by strict conventions. However, women were not allowed to act, as they weren't considered citizens. They were also excluded from attending comic shows as these could be a 'bad influence', to the 'easily susceptible.'³ However, women were allowed to watch the tragedies as they had a moral teaching. Comedic plots were often based around the disruption and reversal of social norms, for example in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* the women of Athens and Sparta agree to withhold sex from their husbands in order to bring about peace between the two cities. I think the reasoning behind restricting women to only tragedies was to not give them any ideas about breaking down their social hierarchy.

Multi rolling was used in all plays as no more than three actors with speaking parts were on stage at one time, which limited the way the playwright enacted the story⁴. 'There is little indication in the traditional text and none in other sources that the diction of different characters...was marked in any individualised way⁵.' However, actors did define different character with *cherionomia*,⁶ each *cherionomia* was associated with a different emotion and actors, depending on their own personal style, expressed it in a personal way. We know this from illustrations on pots, depicting different actors on stage, showing specific gestures. Hegelochus who acted in Euripides' *The Orestes*, in 408 BC was mocked for his pronunciation by the comic playwright Aristophanes in his play *The Frogs*,

¹ The Great Dionysia, the most important dramatic festival in the ancient Athens which took place in spring each year.

² James Renshaw 'In Search of the Greeks', Bristol classical press 2008,p-104

³ Plato, 'Was Ancient Greek Theatre Only for men?', <https://classicalwisdom.com/culture/theater/ancient-greek-theater-men/>

⁴ Within in the play there was more than three characters, but no more than three actors.

⁵ Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre*, Routledge 1992, p-51

⁶ The word *Cheriononimia* means a physical gesture in Ancient Greece.

which was performed at the Lenaia⁷ in 504 BC. The fact that we can see opinions of actors shows that they had different interpretations; some received well and some received badly.

Masks were used in all Dionysian theatre to show different characters, each with an expression representing a recognisable character. An example being the old man character in many comedies. He has a wide grin, furrowed brow, bald head and wears a wreath with ivy leaves and clusters of berries. Furthermore actors would come onstage with multiple masks and change them on stage to represent a change of character. In Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannos, when Oedipus returns to the stage after blinding himself, he wears a different mask which shows that the blinding has taken place. Greek theatre did use special effects and props so not much was left to the audience's imagination, 'Medea appears literally out of his reach in a chariot drawn by winged serpents'⁸. For example, Medea would have been lifted up by a crane when she flies off on her chariot. In some ways the acting style was less suggestive and more real as instead of explaining things; actors were reacting to events that were actually happening on stage, as indeed were the audience. Although the subject matter of Greek theatre was very violent, no violence was shown onstage, but reported after the event. This was because the Greeks were more interested in the motivation before the violence and the consequences after. The fact that the Greeks were more interested in the psyche behind the violence demonstrates an interesting relationship to the Naturalism that would follow centuries later.

I took a speech from Antigone⁹, her final speech in the play, 'O tomb, O Bridal chamber'¹⁰. I decided because of translation issues not to look into the language and punctuation as each version is different because of the complexity of the Greek language. I created a mask out of cardboard and performed it in my garden. Performing with a mask on made me realise the importance of cherionomia to portray the emotion behind the speech. Having a mask on automatically made me project my voice more. Performing a speech following Greek conventions felt very strange and unnatural, as the writing seems so real and organic, but the actions that go with it seem big and over the top. This was an interesting experiment in order to better my understanding of the Greek theatrical conventions. I think because of the ritualistic, religious and moral emphasis on all Greek performance, the actor was a subsidiary to the writer, as the narrative and the meaning of the play was more important. This meant the writers or philosophers were considered the artists and the actors were just a instrument used to tell their art.

Elizabethan theatre has many restrictions when looked at through 21st century eyes. The first, most obvious one to begin with is the fact that they performed with all male troops. Young boys were used to play women in the play, as women were not permitted to act. This was because in parallel with Ancient Greek Society, women had almost no rights, 'as well as legal restrictions on women's rights they had a massive social pressure to uphold of being, subservient, quiet and home bound, their only ambition they held was bearing children and running a successful household.'¹¹ In many respects this was the opposite to how they were viewed in the theatre. The way women were written at the time was highly focused on their sexuality, femininity or desire to find love. If they were not, they were written as the villain like Lady Macbeth, for example and usually come to tragedy. However, women were allowed to go to all theatre plays unlike in Ancient Greek times, but they often wore a mask to conceal their identity and the 'theatre was considered an unseemly place

⁷ Lenaia an originating from Ancient Greece, meaning a lesser dramatic festival that took place annually.

⁸ Franz Verlag, Hermes 1990,p-502

⁹ Ancient Greek play by Sophocles

¹⁰ Sophocles, 'Antigone', Cambridge university press 2009, p-891

¹¹ Lucas Garcia, ' Gender on Shakespeare's stage: a brief history' , product dramaturg 2018, <https://www.writers theatre.org/blog/gender-shakespeares-stage-history/>

for women.¹² Looking at Shakespeare's Hamlet, Hamlet's mother in the play is responsible for Hamlet's depression when she remarries, 'frailty, thy name is women.'¹³ Not only does he call her frail, he brands all women with 'frailty' meaning he sees all women as weak. Furthermore, Ophelia's role in the play solely revolves around her relationship with men and comes to tragedy because Hamlet drives her to madness and she drowns. In her state of madness she sings songs and a common theme of these songs is premarital sex, 'young men will do't if they come to't. By cock they are too blame.'¹⁴ Although in the text it's ambiguous whether they had sexual relations, the fact that they even had sexual desire is on her conscience and shows guilt.

Of course, one must be careful to not put the expectations of a twenty first century audience onto an Elizabethan performer - Naturalism didn't exist and there was no concept of a fourth wall, let alone having the thought of whether or not to remove it. However, it is reasonable to explore what restrictions that might have put on the performer. A young boy wouldn't be able to empathise, understand or embody a women's emotions and one must question the levels of sexuality that could have been conveyed. Similarly to Greek theatre, actors in Elizabethan times performed outside. However, there was only a minimal or suggestive set, effects and lighting. The actors would have to act with big and exaggerated gestures so they could be heard and seen by everyone in the theatre. They also had an atmosphere that shared elements with a modern music concert, whereby if the audience were enjoying an actor's soliloquy for example, they would clap them and the actors would do it again. To me, this suggests that actors did have their own artistic style and interpretation as the audience has an opinion. This means that they are most likely comparing it to another performance which they have seen and are reacting to the actor's style. 'The popularity of theatre reached people from all walks of life.'¹⁵ It was an outlet for everyone; the rich would pay an extra penny to sit in the galleries¹⁶ and the rest were the groundlings.¹⁷ Few people were educated and the language of the plays (written in verse) was complex, as it had to make up for the lack of scenery and lights. Despite the regularly used technique of a prologue - 'but their children's end, nought could remove, is now the two hours 'traffic of our stage',¹⁸ - the actors would have had to show their emotions clearly so that everyone could understand the basic plot line, but also so that everyone standing could see. I think this is where one can see the first roots of melodrama.

The performance troop only consisted of actors (all men of course) who would be expected to do everything from their own stunts to directing their own scenes. Lines were given to the actors by cutting them out of the script, as it was rare for people to be able to write. Actors were only given their lines and their cues and a lot of the time they wouldn't know the context of the play at all. It was unlikely that they would have ever rehearsed together, only joining up a few hours before the performance. This would have affected how they reacted to others and how they understood the plot. Because this was the normal rehearsal process, playwrights gave a lot of detail in their writing with regards to emotion, meaning, breathing and character, with little to no stage directions. The

¹² Melisa Thomas, 'Thearte culture of Early Mondern England', 2009,

<http://www2.cedarcrest.edu/academic/eng/lfletcher/henry4/papers/mthomas.htm>

¹³ William Shakespeare, 'Hamlet', adapted by Tamara Hollingsworth and Harriet Isecke, teacher crafted materials 2008, p-146

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, 'Hamlet', adapted by Tamara Hollingsworth and Harriet Isecke, teacher crafted materials 2008

¹⁵ Linda Alchin, 'Elizabethan Theatre Audiences', Siteseen Ltd 2017, <http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/copyright.htm>

¹⁶ Galleries, were the seats with coverage from the weather

¹⁷ The Groundlings, Shakespearean term for the poor people who would stand with no protection regardless of the weather

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, 'Romeo and Juliet', OUP Oxford 2008, p16

stage directions were written into the dialogue, “ look not so pale”¹⁹, from Macbeth for example would let the actor know he had to look anxious and grief stricken.

In order to have an understanding of this, I picked Timon Of Athens; a Shakespeare play which I had never heard before. I performed a monologue of Timon’s, without reading any context or previous scenes, only looking at the cues before and after the speech. Firstly I read and worked through the script and picked out the key themes and lines. An example being the opening line, ‘O no doubt, my good friends, but the Gods themselves have provided that I shall have much help from you; How had you been my friends else?’²⁰, the use of the two commas between the first statement shows importance and resonance in his speech. Moreover adding pauses gives more weight to what he’s saying and implies that a lot of people could be listening. The use of a semicolon gives a list- like feel which influences the way it’s said. Finally, the rhetorical questions suggest power as the speaker doesn’t need approval or answers from anyone.

It is a jovial speech ‘my good friends’, the use of ‘my ’shows a personal feel, but could also suggest that he’s talking to a more closed group of people. When Timon celebrates that ‘The gods...have provided’, instantly, I could see they have received good news or achieved something. Closely analysing this text allowed me to see how many clues the writer leaves. On a personal level, this has provided some useful clues as to how to tackle Shakespeare, but it also showed me the potential restrictions a performer is bound to; due to the use of language, rhythm and structure. I performed outside in the garden to try and get more of an authentic 1608 feel. Ideally I would have liked to have been able to visit the Globe theatre, however, due to the current climate of self-isolation, I couldn’t justify that as essential travel. After performing this monologue I watched a version online and found that I’d been quite accurate. Surprisingly, I think despite the Greeks ’use of mask wearing, multi rolling and religious restrictions, I found Elizabethan theatre to be more restrictive. However, I think that this was more down to the fact that I struggled with the poetry used by Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, as opposed to the more manageable translations from Greek plays. Despite the restrictions of the time I think that this is where we begin to see a creative team emerging. Although the narrative in this time is beautiful and poetic, because of the different levels of education, acting accidentally became less about the narrative and more about the actor and the entertainment.

Finally contemporary theatre; London has been a ‘total monopoly of dramatic theatre since 1660’²¹. During the industrial revolution, the middle class strived to clean up theatres and separate them from the lower class people. This is an extreme version of Elizabethan times, as they made them inaccessible to the Lower class by introducing more decorum and cleanliness. Throughout Europe the middle class were taking over theatres with the unified expression of necessity for ‘realism’²². This was the first sign of naturalism. The official beginning of naturalism was Theatre Libre, meaning free theatre. Unlike Greek and Elizabethan theatre, there was an opportunity to break restrictions, ‘no theatre devoted itself to a Naturalist policy until Antoine founded the Théâtre-Libre’²³. However, it is evident that this style of theatre had its own convention and ideas of what made there.

¹⁹ William Shakespeare, “Macbeth”, Words worth classics, 1992

²⁰ William Shakespeare, ‘Timon of Athens’, Gorge Mason University 2001, lines-425-428, http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=timonathens&Act=1&Scene=2&Scope=scene&LineHighlight=426#420

²¹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘The Evolution of modern theatre production’ <https://www.britannica.com/art/theater-building/The-influence-of-Appia-and-Craig>

²² ‘Realism’ a general movement that began in 1870 which was recreating a facsimile of real life

²³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, ‘The Evolution of modern theatre production’ <https://www.britannica.com/art/theater-building/The-influence-of-Appia-and-Craig>

The notion of the fourth wall²⁴ emerged in this period and was applied in all early naturalism. This was referred to by Stanislavski as 'public solitude'²⁵, therefore none of the writing featured asides, which was a big part of Elizabethan theatre. Despite Naturalism beginning from free theatre it still had strict conventions. This would affect the actor as it forced them to follow a strict style; what Stanislavski refers to as the 7 main pillars²⁶. This was a strict form of creating a real character consisting of emotional memory, objectives, super objectives, relaxation and subtext. He believed that your body is your instrument and when you went into a rehearsal you left any emotions, stress and thoughts outside in order to have a clear mind to create a real character. This created strict conventions within theatre of writing and creating real and gritty characters. And from the Stanislavski system, the rehearsal process was born, with physiological realism, married with the rehearsals, causing the birth of the actor and a legacy which is still carried through all aspects of theatre. I think that this type of theatre came about partly due to technology moving forward therefore, the theatre wasn't the people's only outlet and it became less of a distraction and more of a choice. Of course nowadays we still have many naturalistic plays and writers, but what has emerged is a collection of so many different styles of theatre meaning that if one doesn't agree with a convention there are many more productions to watch and perform that are completely different. For example, Brecht and Boal both explored theatre breaking naturalistic conventions, 'anyone can do theatre even actors, and theatre can be done everywhere even in the theatre'²⁷.

Productions now have no restrictions with special effects, audio and lighting. This allows the actor to react on stage to both real and fantastical situations and also creates a spectacle within theatre. Plays and society are constantly evolving resulting in all restrictions being broken. Characters get stripped of names and identity, for example in *Lungs*²⁸, the two characters are called M and F (male and female). I think that this strips the performer of any previous identity and allows for the performer to entirely make their own decisions. This moves away from Stanislavski and creates a more abstract version of his process, because despite the lack of an obvious given circumstance, it allows the actor to create their own given circumstances and lends itself to complete artistic interpretation. However, it's not just the actor's interpretation, it's the whole creative team's responsibility. Also, we see a lot of genderless plays, such as *Pool no water*²⁹ which is a play consisting of all choral speaking and no lines are allocated to any particular performer. Choral speaking originates from Greek theatre and having no line allocated, despite giving each performer total artistic freedom and also an equality to each actor, I think this challenges the actor. Personally, I would find it hard to develop the character and to take the audience on a journey. However it's not a restriction as again, the actor and director have complete artistic interpretation.

Although we see new and modern plays written in the 20th century it is popular to redo older plays. Most Elizabethan and Greek theatre modern interpretations follow few of the conventions that they enforced historically, as it is unusual to see all male troops and the use of lighting and effects are almost always featured. However, a popular form of plays are remakes of Elizabethan plays with an all female cast. An example close to home of this is Adjoa Andoh's production of *Richard II*, which she starred in and directed. Plays and performances like this link back to Boal as it is breaking the society's 'norms' and being used as a weapon to empower women. Performing a piece was crucial for my understanding of Greek and Elizabethan theatre. However, because there is such density and broadness in theatre now, I would have to do thousands of pieces to get a complete understanding. My performance journal so far has consisted of classical, musical, contemporary and abstract theatre

²⁴ Fourth wall a imaginary boundary separating the audience and the actors

²⁵ Stanislavski quote,

²⁶ Stanislavski, 'an actor prepares', Bloomsbury publishing plc 2013, p-47-141

²⁷ Augusto Boal, 'theatre of the oppressed', theatre communication books 1993, p68

²⁸ Duncan Macmillan, 2011

²⁹ Mark Ravenhill, play, 2013

so I feel that I have experienced a range of conventions and challenges. I think that overall, modern theatre is free, different genres lend themselves to different Challenges for both actor and director, but as theatre has moved on, I believe that each section of a theatre is equally important and no one is a fiddle to anyone or anything as theatre has moved away from just ritualistic style or even for pure entertainment; it has now become an art. In order to keep up with such a fast moving, constantly evolving art “ any actor worth their salt needs to show as much versatility as they possibly can”³⁰.

³⁰ Daniel Radcliffe quote