"My Two Ears Can Witness": Feminist Pedagogy from Rehearsal Hall to Classroom

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Cover Page Footnote
TheaterCNU's COMEDY OF ERRORS ran for six performances, between 16 and 25 April 2021, in the Ferguson Center for the Arts' Studio Theatre on the campus of Christopher Newport University. It was directed by Laura Grace Godwin and Gregg Lloyd, with scenery by David Shuhuy, costumes by Kathleen Jaremski, lighting and sound by Ryan Bible, technical direction by Tanya Sweet, and stage management by Meaghan Yesford. Laura Grace Godwin served as dramaturg and Gregg Lloyd provided fight direction. Ben Long appeared as Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse. Noah Long appeared as Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse.
INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE
In Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, the enslaved Dromio justifiably complains about beatings at the hands of his master, Antipholus. The instance quoted in our title, "he's at two hands with me, and that my two ears can witness" (Shakespeare, 1594/2017, 2.1.45), evokes the multifaceted meaning of the sentence's final word. Both noun and verb—one can be or bear witness—it involves sight and sound, rendering it a better descriptor for theatre-goers than "spectator" or "audience."

Witnesses are essential to theatre, an artform designed, in Horace's construction, for "dulce et utile" (Braider, 1999, p. 168).¹ Fifth-century Greeks, more specifically, identified the playwright-directors who invented drama as didaskalos, or teacher (Rogers, 2014). At their best, both drama and lecture aspire to the Ciceronian triumvirate "docere, delectare, et movere," with rhetoric used "to teach, to delight, and to move" (Smith, 2020, p. 172) witnesses in theatres or classrooms towards real-world actions.

By Cicero's and Horace's age, didaskalos shifted to dominus, or master, reflecting the enslavement of Roman actors; many performing the Plautine plays that inspired Shakespeare were familiar with Dromio-esque complaints.² Thus, the director stands at the confluence of collaborative teacher and authoritarian master, but whether the juncture is an overlap, spectrum, or crux remains a matter of choice.

University theatre professors are faced with that choice twice over. Courses could perpetuate the dominus model, reducing "students to passive receptors of narrative information coming from the teacher" (Cole, 2008, p. 195). Alternatively, a facilitative didaskalos chooses empowerment over intimidation. Faculty might even, in the spirit of liberatory pedagogues like Paulo Freire and his theatrical counterpart Augusto Boal,³ dare dialectic by learning with and from student-practitioners in the classroom and rehearsal hall.

Recently, faculty-practitioners have made arguments for incorporating liberatory pedagogies in academic theatre (Cole, 2008; Blair, 1992; Young, 2012; Watkins, 2005). This paper, in contrast, addresses professors across campus under the contention that the signature pedagogy of the rehearsal room is inherently liberatory and offers a model for faculty in other disciplines.

The authors' conviction emerged from a production of *The Comedy of Errors* at Christopher Newport University. The text is no vehicle for progressivism, but rehearsals engendered a reading—arising spontaneously from student-practitioners—that resoundingly rejected centuries of patriarchal

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¹ Braider translates the terms as "delight" and "instruction."
² Shakespeare drew upon Plautus' *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo* in composing the text.
³ Influenced by Freire, Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, seeks to transform those who witness his productions to "spect-actors" who query and intervene in the action of a performance (Boal, 2002, p. 15).
interpretation. *Dominus*-style imposition, intent on a traditional, crowd-pleasing product for ticket-holding witnesses, might have missed or squashed this work. Instead, at TheaterCNU, feminist pedagogical practices prioritized *didaskalian* witnessing of process that supported a radical, student-led reinterpretation of Shakespeare's canonical text.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Rehearsal hall techniques adapt easily to traditional classrooms as efficient ways of fostering subjectivity, empowerment, community, and reflection in service of socio-cultural ends.

Drama explores subjectivities insofar as plays showcase contrasting perspectives. Characters encourage those who witness them to respond by sympathizing with heroes and empathizing with villains. Faculty can focus debate through scripted drama yet empower by displacing personal passions onto fictional figures; even the shyest student can use dialogue to represent or critique views and behaviors without directly confronting peers.

Theatre is the ultimate "group project," necessitating collaboration between faculty- and student-practitioners in creative research. Professors in other disciplines who employ its techniques will likewise establish a collective working in "co-investigation" of the text (Cole, 2008, p. 200). In terms of reflection, the traditional classroom offers advantages over the rehearsal hall. Practitioners are subject to the pressures of openings nights, receiving only laughter or applause as witness feedback. Classrooms that utilize rehearsal techniques, however, turn witnesses into collaborators. It is the live interaction between witnessed and witness that makes a rehearsal hall a laboratory and distinguishes theatrical texts from written or recorded ones.

**EXPLANATION**

This essay offers techniques drawn from the signature pedagogies of theatre, here adapted for any classroom. The steps detailed below mirror the process of creating a theatrical performance, without requiring performance itself:

1) **Selection** – Theatre begins with selection of material, often chosen to address socio-cultural issues important to practitioners and those they expect will witness their performance.

2) **Investigation** – Rehearsals begin with traditional research on the structure and context of a play which helps practitioners

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4 "Teacher," "professor," "faculty," and "student," when they appear without the word "practitioner," refer to individuals in higher education who are not teaching or studying theatre.
discover what they are communicating to ticket-holding witnesses.

3) Reconsideration – Creative research applies investigations by generating ways to embody it; practitioners witness each others' work at this stage and give feedback to shape the production.

Each step and activity are discrete, but authors suggest that faculty who select two or more assign them sequentially to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

**STEP 1 – SELECTION**

A liberatory pedagogue will choose dramatic material that relates to theories underlying the course. It is, therefore, useful to classify playtexts as:

a) Polemical – Emerging from recent playwrights advocating particular perspectives, these offer excellent support for students building skills in bearing critical witness.

b) Marginalized – Plays written by marginalized individuals give students opportunity to witness how texts resist and/or reify once-dominant paradigms.

c) Canonical – These generally demonstrate "the mechanisms of dominant ideologies at work" (Blair, 1992, p. 18) but are, therefore, open to critique through informed witnessing in rehearsal and performance.

The authors encourage faculty to collaborate with students in the selection of materials. Such collaboration establishes the professor as a "co-investigator" and encourages engaged witnessing.

The second phase of "Selection," for a traditional classroom, would involve choosing a mode of encounter. Liberatory pedagogy might consider one or more of the following:

a) Callbacks – In auditions, actors are paired to read as directors match practitioner and role. Students should switch and share roles to consider how a speech or scene, presented by individuals with divergent identities, will engender unique interpretations and responses.

b) Closet Drama – After casting, actors read in isolation to prepare for rehearsals. Students may be asked to do the same.

c) Readers’ Theatre – Rehearsals generally start with the company reading aloud then soliciting feedback from fellow witness-
practitioners. In a classroom, roles can be selected or assigned.

Regardless of which, or how many, of the options are selected, the authors encourage documentation and/or exchange of initial responses for subsequent reflection.

"Selection" activities support learning objectives surrounding subjectivity and community. Response prompts should encourage individual perspectives to generate productive disagreement; these might remain unresolved or serve as a catalyst for "Investigation."

**STEP 2 – INVESTIGATION**

Following read-throughs, rehearsals proceed to a period of "tablework" using dramatic analysis to reveal hierarchies and ideologies. The first steps involve exploration of a play's:

a) **Agon** – The Greek term for conflict forms the root of "protagonist" and "antagonist." Etymologically speaking, these are not the hero and villain but, rather, the character most for or against conflict or change.

b) **Genre** – Once characters are identified, analysts determine genre. Sympathy is crucial because witness perspectives on character affect perspective; if the sympathetic character ends happily, the play is generally a comedy, if not, it is a tragedy.

c) **Environment** – Contextual analysis, exploring the temporal, geographical, political, economic, cultural, and technological "given circumstances" of a play, sheds light on how playwrights position characters to earn or forfeit witness sympathies.

In analysis, students witness the ways plays support or undercut hegemonies. Note, there few "right" answers in theatre, only possibilities that are more, or less, supportable with reference to the playtext and those interpreting it.

An alternative, or additional, way to "Investigate" is to explore context. This research involves consideration of the:

a) **Author** – Though students should be cautioned against reliance on "authorial intent," data on the life and work of a playwright can illuminate structural choices.

b) **Circumstance** – The categories examined in the "Environment"
section are ripe for exploration if author and characters inhabit different times and places.

c) Criticism – Even a cursory consideration of dramatic or theatrical criticism, combined with documentation of realized performance, yields insight into alternative interpretations.

These "Investigation" activities are designed, particularly if undertaken as group presentations, not merely to foster community, but also to empower it, since witnessing others' work clarifies and qualifies one's own.

STEP 3 – RECONSIDERATION
After "Selection" and/or "Investigation," reassessment is in order. In rehearsals, practitioners synthesize tablework and research in search of an interpretation. A liberatory classroom would task the community to:

a) Write – Individual reflection can detail evolutions of thought, regarding the play or class paradigms, made possible by witnessing others' work.

b) Discuss – The classroom community, like theatrical practitioners, might collaborate to explore how assumptions were reinforced or challenged by research.

c) Connect – Here, students link drama to a "real world" conflict involving similar issues; it, too, could undergo "Investigation," or students might use the play's resolution to extrapolate outcomes.

Any of these options can generate additional rounds of research and reflection. Rehearsals culminate in performances shared with those who have tickets to witness them. Traditional classrooms can also support creativity:

a) Recast – The community could return to the Callbacks exercise, exchanging roles to witness how analysis shaped understanding.

b) Present – Faculty and/or students might select an "ideal" cast or casts, informed by "Selection" and/or "Investigation," for a subsequent round of Readers' Theatre informed by theoretical paradigms.

c) Adapt – Re-written scenes, in dramatic or narrative form, can shift roles or sympathies, or offer different outcomes, to reflect what students witnessed.
The authors encourage faculty to allow students, individually, in teams, or as a community, to select creative engagements with which they are comfortable. "Reconsideration" activities obviously involve reflection, but they also—particularly the latter three—empower by supporting students in establishing “a new relationship to…the text. It is…something into which [they] may choose to move…or…something which [they] can critique…thereby illuminating its limitations and shortcomings” (Blair, 1992, p. 20). Drama is always unfinished until it becomes theatre; the necessity of responding to it, subjectively but authoritatively, is what makes it a powerful pedagogical tool.

ASSESSMENT
Given that experts are sometimes reluctant to critique expression, we suggest that faculty focus on process rather than product in assessment. Exercises were designed with traditional criteria in mind: comprehension and engagement are easily evaluated by the least artistic faculty member and citation of primary/secondary texts to support assertions is common across campus. Focus on process affords freedom for creativity, though the authors caution that ground rules for respectful, thoughtful, non-physical interactions are essential. If established with, rather than for, students, the quality of their input can form part of an assessment of journeys towards sensitive, informed witnessing.

DEBRIEFING
Contending, with Cole (2008), that it is "readily apparent…some of the theories of liberatory practice already exist in the rehearsal hall," (p. 192) the authors will briefly recount how rehearsals for Comedy of Errors mirrored our proposed activities and yielded progressive results.

The play was selected to showcase twin brothers Ben and Noah Long in their final semester. Ben was cast as long-separated twins both named Antipholus and Noah as a pair christened Dromio, enslaved to the Antipholi. The bifurcated construction eschewed the obvious casting of brothers as brothers, precluding conflation as "the twins" and encouraging actors to bring subjective experience to bear as each played his own twin.

As characters were explored in investigation, the real-life brothers' close relationship informed their interpretation of the play. Despite the directors' intention to exploit a talent for slapstick, the actors seemed reluctant to manifest the supposedly comic violence. This proved impactful in the penultimate scene when Antipholus' aggression provokes a soliloquy from Dromio:

I have served him from the hour of my nativity to this instant, and have nothing at his hands for my service but blows. When I am cold, he heats me with beating; when I am warm, he cools me with beating; I am waked
with it when I sleep; raised with it when I sit; driven out of doors with it when I go from home; welcomed home with it when I return…and, I think when he hath lamed me, I shall beg with it from door to door.

(Shakespeare, 1594/2017, 4.4.31 – 40)

Productions of *Comedy* generally mine this moment for laughs, with Antipholus enacting and Dromio enduring. The brothers Long, in contrast, rehearsed it in earnest, extending their embodied critique through the scene as Antipholus reacted to his brutality with guilt and disgust. Practitioners in rehearsal, including the faculty directors who encouraged the reinterpretation, bore witness to the powerful ways offstage identity aggregates productively with onstage personae. As a result, witnesses to performance were compelled to experience a canonical text in a way that undermined, rather than accepted or supported, violent masculinity.

To conclude, the authors urge greater collaboration between liberatory faculty, regardless of discipline. We do so because practitioners involved with TheaterCNU's *Comedy of Errors* were unaware of how closely the signature pedagogies of academic theatre mirror feminist teaching practice; we became aware only after a fortuitous discussion with a colleague. That our techniques *naturally* yielded feminist results suggests rehearsal rooms have something to
offer others seeking to master techniques that move students, no longer mere witnesses, to action.
References


