

## **What Zombie Feminist Bouffons Can Offer Applied Theatre: Seduction and Provocation in Death Married My Daughter**

Yasmine Kandil and Michelle MacArthur

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Article abstract

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# What Zombie Feminist Bouffons Can Offer Applied Theatre: Seduction and Provocation in *Death Married My Daughter*

YASMINE KANDIL AND MICHELLE MACARTHUR

Starting from applied theatre scholar Adrian Jackson's assertion that a combination of seduction and provocation is crucial to the success of authentic intervention in theatre for social change, this article looks outside of traditional Forum Theatre for a model of this practice. Using Danya Buonastella and Nina Gilmour's bouffon clown show *Death Married My Daughter* as its case study, this article draws on scholarship in the areas of applied theatre and feminist theory to examine what audience engagement and intervention might look like in the unsettling times in which we live. The performers' use of bouffon seduces and provokes their audience in order to elicit empathy for the characters, expose the presence of neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies in women's lives, and implicate their audience in a project of socio-political change. The article concludes by suggesting what applied theatre practitioners could learn from theatre that does not require direct intervention in the action on stage but nevertheless pushes the audience out of a comfortable, passive spectatorship.

*Partant d'une déclaration par Adrian Jackson, chercheur en théâtre appliqué, selon laquelle un mélange de séduction et de provocation est essentiel au succès du théâtre d'intervention authentique, Yasmine Kandil et Michelle MacArthur cherchent au-delà du théâtre-forum traditionnel un modèle pour cette pratique. Dans leur analyse de la pièce bouffonne Death Married My Daughter de Danya Buonastella et Nina Gilmour, Kandil et MacArthur se servent de recherches en théâtre appliqué et en études féministes pour se demander à quoi peut ressembler l'engagement et l'intervention du public en cette époque troublée qui est la nôtre. Le jeu bouffon employé par les interprètes leur permettrait de séduire et de provoquer l'auditoire, de faire ressentir de l'empathie pour les personnages, d'exposer la présence d'idéologies néolibérales et postféministes dans le quotidien des femmes et de faire participer le public à un projet de changement sociopolitique. Kandil et MacArthur font valoir que les praticiens du théâtre appliqué pourraient tirer des leçons du théâtre qui n'appelle pas à l'intervention directe dans l'action sur scène mais qui oblige tout de même son auditoire à sortir de son rôle confortable et passif d'observateur.*



“Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.”

—Desdemona, *Death Married My Daughter*

While Desdemona’s conclusion at the end of *Death Married My Daughter* might sound familiar to audience members versed in second wave radical feminism, Valerie Solanas’s famed 1967 SCUM Manifesto (for Society for Cutting Up Men) takes on new meaning when recited within the context of young performers Danya Buonastella and Nina Gilmour’s bouffon clown show. Set in present day, *Death Married My Daughter* finds Desdemona and Ophelia returning from the afterlife to settle old scores. It is hard to ignore their physical appearance: two women who seem to be disfigured in some way, crawling across the stage for their entrance. They are missing teeth, and their hair is a jumbled mess (the performers wear several wigs that are mangled to create the effect of looking decrepit). Their clothes are torn and worn out. They look as though they have been plucked from the earth, where they had been rotting for hundreds of years; they are effectively zombie incarnations of their Shakespearean selves. Using parody, mockery, and other techniques of bouffon clown, these two women take the audience on a wild journey denouncing men, patriarchy, and the sexist world that has permitted their tormentors (Othello and Hamlet) to become the heroes of their respective tragedies.

Premiering in 2013 at the Toronto Fringe Festival and touring Ontario in the years that followed, *Death Married My Daughter* reacts to the swelling conservative sentiment of the 2010s and invokes the spirit of social-political movements from decades earlier. Calling itself a “catharsis,” the show enlists its audience’s help in seeking justice and relief for its Shakespearean heroines and toppling the structural causes of their oppression. In a promotional *YouTube* video for a 2013 performance in Hamilton, Ontario, the clowns ask, “Why should Hamiltonians come to see us? Well, if you care about humanity, about time and place, about women and men—and Desdemona and Ophelia of course—you must come!”

Though defying generic confines, in its appeal to empathy, its performance strategies, and its call to action, *Death Married My Daughter* recalls practices of both applied theatre and feminist theatre. Yet, as a show produced by emerging artists during “a new moment in political life” marked by “waves of misogyny, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and xenophobic nationalism,” its employment of these practices is markedly distinct (Gill, “The Affective” 608-09). Members of a generation described by Rosalind Gill as “young women raised on stories of ‘girl power,’ ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’” (609), Buonastella and Gilmour use their art to work through the contradictions pervading these “dangerous and frightening times” (608), when the gains of social justice movements are increasingly eroded by neoliberal economics and conservative politics, and when messages of empowerment circulate alongside oppressive discourses and policies. In this article we examine the production through the intersecting scholarship of applied theatre and feminist theory, two approaches to engaging with theatre for social change that we believe are vital in addressing the times we live in at present. We argue that while *Death Married My Daughter* does not conform to the typical makings of an applied theatre production, it serves as a model for how theatre

of this kind can do the work of social change, specifically through the show's realization of Adrian Jackson's concept of seduction and provocation. Using bouffon clown to draw the audience's empathy before rousing their discontent, the play exposes the harmful intertwining of postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies in women's lives and positions feminist collective action as an antidote. After establishing the importance of applied theatre and feminist theory to the immediacy of this work, we examine how Buonastella and Gilmour skillfully use mockery, parody, and irony to implement Jackson's notions of seduction and provocation. We conclude by suggesting that tackling issues in a playful, unapologetic manner (essentially invoking the method of bouffon) might offer a new passage for applied theatre makers to master the skill proposed by Jackson, and in so doing, present a method of active engagement with the audience.

## Where Applied Theatre and Feminist Theory Intersect

The practice of applied theatre has a long history of creating opportunities for theatre practitioners, consumers of the theatre, non-theatre folk, and community members to come together to dialogue, respond to an issue, celebrate an event or a group of people, or become informed about a topic of importance to those performing or those witnessing the performance (audiences). A great power of this practice is its ability to connect people who might have never come together otherwise and who might have never thought to encounter the arts in this manner. James Thompson addresses this practice's potential for social change, in particular when it involves marginalized communities:

Applied Theatre is a participatory theatre created by people who would not usually make theatre. It is, I would hope, a practice by, with and for the excluded and marginalised. It is, at its best, a theatre that translates and adapts to the unfamiliar. It is a theatre wedded to vital issues and one that values debate. In circumstances where celebratory escapism is dominant, it can be the theatre of serious enquiry. (15-16)

One of the most prolific genres of applied theatre is Theatre of the Oppressed, created by Brazilian director Augusto Boal (1979), and based on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). As a practice, Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is concerned with bringing to the surface dynamics of oppression that exist in participants' lives but that they have stopped questioning or felt too powerless to fight back against. Both TO and its central technique Forum Theatre have been widely used around the world to challenge injustice by awakening people's spirits to resist oppression. As applied theatre scholar Ann Elizabeth Armstrong points out, in its commitment to social justice and implicit "understanding that oppression can be transformed and that victimhood is not inevitable" (179) TO shares common ground with feminist theory. Gesturing to the rich history of theatre for social change work by feminist practitioners and scholars, Armstrong argues that "[t]he work of feminism and TO relies upon the analysis of contradiction, a Marxist dialectical process in which transformation occurs through struggle and conflict" (178).

Both TO and feminist theory offer important tools to examine oppressive dynamics and move toward transformation through collective action. Indeed, in this "new moment in

political life” (Gill, “The Affective” 608), TO’s emphasis on mobilizing groups of “spect-actors” offers an antidote to the individualizing forces of neoliberalism, while feminist theory offers a way to analyze and challenge the gendered power dynamics that emerge from this paradigm. As feminist scholars such as Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff have pointed out, neoliberalism is not just a political-economic theory—broadly defined as “a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” (Gill and Scharff 5)—but a form of governmentality that “extends [its reach] far beyond the market” and requires individuals to be increasingly self-reliant and self-governing (Butler 40). This has particular effects for women and other marginalized groups. Jess Butler, citing Gill and Scharff, notes, “increased individualism and autonomy often reinstate hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, and class and breed new forms of power” (41). It follows that scholars such as Butler, Gill, and Scharff have identified resonances between neoliberalism and postfeminism, the latter defined as an ideology that subtly undermines feminist activism by shoring up ideals of individualism, choice, and empowerment. We take-up these resonances in more detail shortly in our analysis of the play.

As theatre scholars coming from respective backgrounds in applied theatre and feminist theory, we feel a renewed sense of urgency to use our practice to fight insidious neoliberal structures that are eroding our values and the place of the arts in our lives. We find Adrian Jackson’s work on the performer-audience relationship particularly useful in shedding light on how we might do this. One of Boal’s closest supporters, Jackson writes about the challenge of Forum Theatre as a methodology, and specifically the challenge of inviting authentic audience participation that is not coerced or forceful: “[...] sometimes one sees Forum Theatre in which intervention is solicited (or even begged) for all the wrong reasons and by all the wrong methods” (43). He proposes the notion of “seduction and provocation,” which he considers to be vital in the success of any Forum Theatre experience. He writes,

The best Forum Theatre acts with this combination of seduction and provocation to release the innate dissatisfaction in its audience members so that, without coercion, they feel an overwhelming urge to make their thoughts and feelings known by taking action; in the form of *intervention*. (45)

In *Death Married My Daughter*, the creators skillfully illustrate the technique that Jackson is pointing to above. Ironically, this piece was not created as an “intervention” in the Boalian sense, so, by all academic definitions, it does not conform to the makings of an applied theatre piece; that said, it is compelling in its uncanny ability to seduce and provoke its audience.

## Seduced by Zombie Feminist Bouffons

Tim Prentki writes, “[...] change itself arises from a dialectical encounter between the understanding developed through lived experience and the capacity to construct alternatives; that inherently theatrical process of an encounter between reality and imagination” (16). Seduction in the context of applied theatre responds to an audience’s investment in that lived experience; this breeds connection and ultimately investment in the narrative that is taking place

on stage. The danger is when applied theatre initiatives that aim to provoke end up glossing over this element of seduction, which ultimately could lead to works that have not taken into account the nuances that create dynamics of oppression and/or that perpetuate simplified understandings of our world, ones of victims and heroes, black and white narratives without the tensions born from the ambiguity and confusion that exist in gray areas. But authentic seduction lives in those gray areas, in places where audiences do not expect themselves to develop empathy towards characters on stage, and in turn to believe in their cause. In *Death Married My Daughter*, audience members are first encouraged to develop empathy, then to see their implication, and finally to understand their complicity.

Buonastella and Gilmour elicit audience investment in their cause to find closure for Desdemona and Ophelia, recognizing that due to their tragic deaths neither has truly experienced “catharsis.” The heroines have felt arrested, suspended in their suffering, and travelled for over four centuries to find this closure. But—and here is where they tap into how to create that audience investment—they solicit the audience to complete their narrative. They claim that what has been missing for them is “Dear audience. You.” And with this assertion, they not only invite the audience to become part of the narrative, they also empower spectators by giving them an active role in helping these wretched souls reach catharsis. The following is an excerpt from their opening scene, which shows the mastery of how they seduce their audience into their world:

OPHELIA: Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

DESDEMONA: Good evening. My name is Desdemona.

OPHELIA: And I’m Ophelia.

BOTH: Ever heard of us? No? You know...it’s us.

At this point the two quickly mime Ophelia’s drowning scene and Desdemona’s death by strangulation.

DESDEMONA: The real ones.

OPHELIA: The originals.

DESDEMONA: We have been traveling four-hundred and ten years.

OPHELIA: We dragged our bodies across land and up mountains.

DESDEMONA: We swam oceans and crawled through deserts.

OPHELIA: Because our souls could not rest peacefully.

DESDEMONA: We could not free ourselves from the shackles of the past.

OPHELIA: We kept playing our deaths over and over.

DESDEMONA: But there was no release. We were tormented.

OPHELIA: We could not find closure.

DESDEMONA: We could not attain catharsis.

OPHELIA: Something wasn’t right.

DESDEMONA: Something was missing.

BOTH: You.

DESDEMONA: Yes, dear audience. You.

*(They point to everyone in the audience.)*

DESDEMONA: Well, now that you are here and we are here, let us begin.



Nina Gilmour as Desdemona (left) and Danya Buonostella as Ophelia (right) introduce themselves to their audience, just before they replay their famous “death” scenes in their respective Shakespearean roles. Photographer: Johnny Hockin

After this introduction Ophelia and Desdemona enact Desdemona’s death scene, with Ophelia playing Othello. The scene lasts a few minutes, as they play out the confrontation between Othello and Desdemona to the soundtrack of Verdi’s opera *Otello*. What starts as a playful, comedic mockery of the seriousness of Othello and the vulnerability of Desdemona quickly turns into a gruesome scene where Othello strangles Desdemona with his bare hands (no pillow used to soften the blow). In the respective performances we attended, at this point the audience was no longer laughing; they were transfixed as Desdemona let out her last breath.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the audience’s shock comes from how quickly they develop empathy towards these clowns, and how suddenly they are confronted with a very painful death of someone who is innocent. What comes afterwards is another skillfully crafted seduction, but with a twist.

After Desdemona’s death scene, she springs to life taking her applause, prompted by Ophelia, still posing as Othello. Then it is Othello’s turn to take the applause. Desdemona gestures towards Othello, saying, in complete mockery, “The Tragedy of Othello.” She applauds with exaggeration. Othello basks in his glory, sheepishly trying to look humble. Ophelia/Othello then takes his/her helmet off, and both women proceed to kiss it, continuing with the praise:

*(Desdemona gets up and kisses Othello’s helmet and all over his body. They begin caressing and kissing the helmet.)*

DESDEMONA: Poor Othello. He was so beautiful.

OPHELIA: He made me cry.

DESDEMONA *(moving her butt)*: He really touched me.

OPHELIA: He loved her so much.

DESDEMONA: She made him jealous.

OPHELIA: He really took me on an emotional journey

DESDEMONA: He played the entire palette of human emotions.

OPHELIA: He loved her so much

*(They both kiss the helmet and both spit to the ground and fixed point to the audience.)*

In this moment Ophelia and Desdemona parody the audience and how much they are implicated in this dysfunctional dynamic through their misguided idolatry of powerful men. The performers draw attention to the audience's passive role as spectators, whereby watching and celebrating these representations of violent masculinity on stage they tacitly endorse them. On audience implication Jackson writes, "Much Forum [Theatre] intervention does work on those lines, implicating the audience in the action of the piece by stimulating the essential, but often dormant, human urge to put right injustice" (43). By then, the audience might have reached the point of wanting to correct this "injustice," but with this careful seduction the performers are only beginning to plant the seed of implication. For the duration of the show the clowns move between seduction and provocation as they gently reveal the audience's complicity in the structures they are exposing and confront them with their façade of self-righteousness.

Key to their ability to seduce and provoke their audience is the performers' use of bouffon. Bouffon, as adapted for the theatre by Jacques Lecoq and his student Philippe Gaulier, aims to foreground "the social dimension of human relations, showing up its absurdities" and expose "hierarchies of power, and their reversal" (Lecoq 119).<sup>2</sup> In developing his practice, Lecoq drew inspiration from Medieval performance traditions, wherein those who were exiled from society due to physical deformities or other "ills" were invited back during special festivities to perform for the village elite, where they would playfully parody their audience "in a sweet and pandering manner" and temporarily upset the social order (Derksen 234). Like the king's fool who "was licensed to express truth in all its forms," Lecoq's bouffon "can say the unsayable, going so far as to mock what 'cannot' be mocked: war, famine, God" (Lecoq 118). By occupying grotesque, transformed bodies—the bodies of outsiders—contemporary bouffon performers find freedom to parody, mock, and critique those who hold power. The use of the bouffon to speak back to power, to correct social wrongs, and to denounce those who have oppressed marginalized people finds parallels in applied theatre practice. Paulo Freire offers an analysis of how oppressed people are regarded by "healthy society," but instead of treating them as outcasts like the bouffon, in this case their oppressors try to repair them in some way: "The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these 'incompetent and lazy' folk into its own patterns by changing their mentality" (74). In both conceptions, the oppressed represent a threat to society, one which must be addressed by exile or repair.

In *Death Married My Daughter* Ophelia and Desdemona resist the fate that has been given them as helpless victims and come back not only to show the audience that their conventional notions of victim/hero, pathological society/healthy society are skewed, but also to claim their power as women in a male-dominant culture. They join the ranks of the "outcasts" in order to position themselves as oppressed, and they use that to fuel their rage against the system. They also expose their own seduction into the system, as reflected



in their idolization of Othello in the helmet kissing scene. Bouffon not only provides the means to critique the patriarchal institutions that oppress them, but also to mock myriad subjects that “cannot be mocked,” from war to God, as Lecoq suggests above, and from aborted fetuses to roasted dead babies, as demonstrated in the show.

These functions of bouffon are powerfully illustrated in a drawn-out sequence that begins when a sudden thunder storm leaves Ophelia and Desdemona scrambling to find cover offstage. A moment later they waddle back on stage visibly pregnant and look up to the sky. “I think we really pissed him off this time,” says Ophelia, alluding to a non-consensual immaculate conception. The women are soon in the throes of labour and squat to give birth to baby boys, using their index fingers to confirm the anatomy of the dolls they hold up to the audience. “It’s a boy,” Desdemona says. “It sure is,” Ophelia replies with relief. “Phew!” Desdemona exclaims. Using the dolls as puppets, the performers take on the personas of the baby boys, who introduce themselves as infant versions of famous politicians and public figures, including the following: “I’m going to be Putin and persecute Pussy Riot!,” “I’m gonna be Steven Harper and privatize all natural Canadian resources,” “I’m going to be Kim Jong Un and stock pile nuclear weapons!,” “I’m going to be Rush Limbaugh and call feminists what they really are, feminazis!” The last baby to introduce himself is conspiracy theorist/alt-right radio host Alex Jones; after his introduction, the dolls start pleasuring themselves as they quote gun lobby rhetoric. The babies climax repeating “infowars.com, infowars.com!” (Jones’s website), the lights shift again, and the clowns return to cradling and doting on their baby boys: “Stalin’s teeny tiny eyelashes,” “Adolf’s little dimples,” Ophelia and Desdemona coo.

Through the grotesquery of the bouffons and their puppets, Buonastella and Gilmour elicit laughter as they draw connections between patriarchal religion, the cultural veneration of boys, abuse, sexual assault, environmental destruction, misogyny, and fascism. Mocking men from different times and places, the performers also underscore the omnipresence of patriarchy and critique the abuses of power that stem from it. The baby climax—one of the most taboo moments in the play—positions violence and alt-right rhetoric as demonstrations of virility and products of masculine self-pleasure. A way out of this seemingly endless cycle of destructive patriarchy is presented later, in the penultimate moment of the play. Desdemona and Ophelia roast the baby dolls in a barbeque and eat them, taking near-orgasmic pleasure in their grotesque feast. In “mocking what cannot be mocked” (in this last instance, baby cannibalism), the clowns advance a clear message: radical feminist action is the path to radical social-political change. In production, this moment is, unsurprisingly, quite polarizing, leaving some audience members offended and upset, but many others energized and responsive to the underlying message of the provocation.

As Céleste Derksen argues, the bouffon’s liminal role as an outsider who, within the context of performance, is able to temporarily “upset normative physical and social standards” (234) holds great potential as a feminist performance strategy. In her study of Karen Hines and her bouffon clown alter ego Pochsy, Derksen argues that Hines’s performance is politically and physically subversive in two ways: “first, because it endeavors to make audience members aware that gender is a means of social and physical control; and second, because it provides a model of the kind of performative playfulness that can expand gender possibilities” (234). Though Derksen does not use Jackson’s language of seduction and provocation

in her study, these tools are clearly integral to Hines's approach, which the artist describes to Derksen:

*Bouffon* has played a huge part in determining the physicality of Pochsy—it is very politically and socially conscious when you break it down, but as a style it is as simple as pretty feet [...] move prettily, entertain the audience, keep them visually entranced. And if you can accomplish that, you will be able then to accomplish your task of hurling the slings and arrows. It's almost like a decoy. (Hines qtd. in Derksen 235)

Hines's virtuosic performance as the ultrafeminine Pochsy is deliberately used to seduce the audience, reflecting Jackson's emphasis that seduction happens through the "power of the narrative and the quality of the theatrical experience" and that the art "must be good enough" given the circumstances and resources available (44). Though Hines does not require her audience members to directly intervene on stage in the way that applied theatre artists do, provocation still occurs within the conventions of her bouffon performance in many ways: through the disjunction between persona and performer, through Hines's use of parody and "direct verbal and visual address," through her subversion of the gaze and her "looking-at-being-looked-at-ness" (Derksen 241). In other words, provocation manifests in what Hines calls "the hurling of the slings and arrows" and the "attack behind the invitation" (qtd. in Derksen 235), which aim to make spectators aware of the cultural construction of gender and see new possibilities for it.

Buonastella and Gilmour's approach in *Death Married My Daughter* relies on a similar doubleness: they play out recognizable tropes of both masculinity and femininity only to undercut them with parody and irony. Desdemona and Ophelia dress their decrepit bodies in delicate nightgowns and lipstick and charm the audience with their attempts to move gracefully across the stage and their comic reenactments of their deaths. Like Hines's Pochsy, whose pretty feet act as a decoy for the slings and arrows she hurls, Buonastella and Gilmour's Desdemona and Ophelia endear themselves to the audience as they ridicule the standards of their patriarchal, neoliberal society. Moreover, by taking on iconic, centuries-old characters and placing them in a contemporary world alongside figures from Stalin to Ann Coulter, the creators interrogate the notion of progress upon which they—young women belonging to a generation born after the second wave of feminism and told to "be confident, to lean in, to just be empowered" (Banet-Weiser)—were raised. They remind us that underneath or perhaps co-existing with what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls the spectacular visibility of popular feminism lies an even more powerful popular misogyny, which "folds into state and national structures with terrible efficiency" (Banet-Weiser). Moreover, by enacting familiar tropes of femininity and vignettes of empowerment only to explode these ideas and expose them as the by-products of patriarchy, the performers highlight the harmful effects of postfeminism and neoliberalism on women's lives.

## Provocation and Postfeminism

The term postfeminism has become a significant critical framework within feminist scholarship in the past three decades, but its meanings and applications remain contested. Rosalind Gill sums-up some of the major uses of the term: "a time 'after' (second wave) feminism; to

capture a sense of an epistemological break within feminism, suggesting an alignment with other ‘post’ movements (poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcoloniality); and to propose connections to the Third Wave” (“Post-postfeminism?” 612-13). Angela McRobbie, another key theorist of postfeminism, defines the term as “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined” (255). This process occurs through what she calls a “double entanglement,” wherein feminism is taken into account and then repudiated (255-56). This might manifest in, for example, a return to “traditional” family values under the guise of choice afforded by feminist victories of the past. Both theorists understand postfeminism to be a way of displacing the work of feminism as a radical and collective political movement demanding equality and structural change, and instead shifting the focus to ideas of individualism, choice, and empowerment. In this shifting, there are clear resonances between postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies. Citing the work of Scharff and Gill, Butler summarizes:

[B]oth are structured by a “current of individualism” that undermines notions of the social or political; both demand an autonomous, self-regulating, active subject; and, perhaps most importantly, both call upon women—more so than men—to “work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen.” (45)

In drawing these comparisons, Butler is also careful to note the complex ways in which both ideologies reinstate hierarchies of gender, race, class, and sexuality and rely on normative conceptions of identity. In other words, “the idealized postfeminist subject is a white, Western, heterosexual woman” (47). Even as popular feminism experiences a moment of increased visibility—as seen in, for example, pink pussyhats, the #metoo movement, and the number of celebrities taking-up the cause—these iterations of feminism often centre the experiences of privileged women while ignoring those of marginalized women as well as the broader socio-political structures that sustain these power differentials.<sup>3</sup>

In analyzing *Death Married My Daughter* through the lens of postfeminism, we consider the complex co-existence of feminist, misogynist, and anti-feminist discourses in the current cultural moment and examine how they intermingle in the play and in its relationship with its audience. Following the legacy of two celebrated plays by Canadian women—Ann Marie Macdonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona, (Good Morning Juliet)* (1988) and Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* (1997), both produced by Nightwood Theatre, Canada’s self-proclaimed “foremost feminist theatre”—*Death Married My Daughter* interrogates the representation of gender and sexuality in Shakespeare and connects these literary representations to women’s lived experiences in the “real” world. But, unlike these other two works, it moves beyond a feminist reading of the Bard’s heroines by integrating what Gill calls postfeminist sensibilities within its dramaturgy. It also, significantly, directly engages the audience, breaking the fourth wall in direct address and pushing their boundaries of comfort through its bouffon-fueled depictions of sexuality, violence, and misogyny. In *Death Married My Daughter*, postfeminist sensibilities are deployed as ironic performance strategies that work to seduce and provoke, elicit empathy and alienate, and raise awareness and incite action—strategies that align it with applied theatre praxis.

The themes of female sexuality and pleasure are explored at multiple points in the play. After the performers re-enact the Tragedy of Ophelia for the audience, the repetition of Ophelia’s line “Pray you, love, remember” builds into a chant, and the performers, as the script instructs, “switch to sweet little girls” and take communion. As they consume the body and blood of Christ, Desdemona and Ophelia take increasing pleasure in the Catholic rite. They crawl, roll, writhe, and gyrate on the stage; Desdemona thrusts up and down over an imagined lover on the floor and Ophelia does a back bend in an impressive move signaling both the *Kama Sutra* and *The Exorcist*; the flowers they gathered in their re-enactment of Act four, scene five of *Hamlet* moments earlier become sexual props and parts (at one point, Ophelia holds her bouquet between her legs and Desdemona dives in head-first; at another, Desdemona bends over and Ophelia whips her with her bouquet). “Mmmmmm, corpus Christi,” Desdemona moans. “The body of Christ,” Ophelia says longingly. Then, a beat, and the performers drop the “sweet little girl” voices, straighten-up, and address the audience in monotone: “Daddy’s girl. Passive, adaptable, respectful, and in awe of the male. Trained from an early childhood of niceness, politeness, and dignity in pandering to the male needs.”



Nina Gilmour as Desdemona (left), and Danya Buonostella as Ophelia (right) in *Death Married My Daughter*. In this section the two performers are about to combine their communion rituals with their expressions of sexual pleasure, all as a satirical display of the contradictions that lie in both. Photographer: Johnny Hockin

In this moment, threads of feminism, postfeminism, and misogyny intersect. On one level, it is a moment of pure pleasure, as Ophelia and Desdemona's growing gratification—and the exaggerated bouffon performance thereof—elicits laughter from the audience, pulling them in with each ridiculous thrust and breathy moan of Communion. A preliminary feminist reading of this moment might suggest that the characters are asserting the agency over their lives and bodies that they are denied within the contexts of *Hamlet* and *Othello* respectively, countering their dramatic deaths with the sexual pleasure of their “little deaths.” The references to Catholicism unleash a simultaneous critique of the paternalism of the church and its control over women's bodies. This feminist strategy of “rescuing” or re-appropriating Shakespeare's women and turning them from victims to heroes in their own stories is employed in MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona, (Good Morning Juliet)*, where the titular characters are imbued with agency, active desire, and fluid sexuality, and comedy is used to expose and challenge gender roles in Shakespeare and in contemporary society.

On another level, however, Ophelia and Desdemona's sexual revelry also enacts a pervasive postfeminist trope, wherein women, once portrayed as sexual objects, become desiring sexual subjects. Gill identifies this sensibility as a shift in the way power operates in popular culture, from an external male gaze to one that is (dangerously) internalized (“Postfeminist Media” 151). She writes,

In this regime, power is not imposed from above or the outside but constructs our very subjectivity. Girls and women are invited to become a particular kind of self, and are endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography. (152)

This sensibility is found everywhere in contemporary media, from Gill's example of Wonderbra advertisements equating cleavage with power, to Kim Kardashian's pioneering use of the selfie to turn the gaze on herself, and her subsequent capitalization of it in her 2015 coffee table book *Selfish*. This sensibility is found in theatre too, such as in the persistent objectification of women in contemporary theatre written and directed by both men and women.<sup>4</sup> In *Death Married My Daughter*, however, the schism between the “heterosexual male fantasy” women fashion themselves to be and their (gendered) reality is made visible through Ophelia and Desdemona's parodic performance and grotesque appearances. Ophelia and Desdemona are not Victoria Secret models claiming their sexual prowess on a runway or billboard: they are ugly clowns defiling the Catholic mass. Here, the act of “self-objectification” is exposed through its failure. In Derksen's words, bouffon performance is employed “to make audience members aware that gender is a means of social and physical control” (234)—control imposed on women through an external gaze but also *by* women through an internal gaze. This ironic use of a postfeminist sensibility then works to deconstruct the gaze and open-up a feminist reading of patriarchal imaginations of women on stage and women's complicity in upholding them. The sharp transition to the “Daddy's girl” speech signals this reading, as they reveal a process of socialization that trains women to “pander to male needs” and internalize their submissive roles. Returning to the framework of seduction and provocation, the representation in this moment of Ophelia and Desdemona as liberated sexual beings works to seduce the audience—through pleasure,

through silliness, through titillation—before undercutting this representation by exposing its misogynistic underpinnings.

Immediately following the “daddy’s girl” speech, the lights change and we are transported to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) featuring guest speaker Ann Coulter, who is here “to shed light on a question that is important to all of us: how can you be a woman and a conservative at the same time?” Desdemona, transformed into Coulter, welcomes us and launches into a diatribe that points its finger at feminism as the root of all of women’s problems, offering a sweeping analysis that connects the dots between dating, sex, voting, birth control, gun control, health insurance, and abortion. Repeating verbatim sections of a 2012 speech given by Coulter at the CPAC conference, Desdemona-as-Coulter declares,

I think it’s the feminist movement that has set us back. I mean, I don’t write about feminism, it seems so manifestly obvious that it doesn’t need my stunning skills or analysis. But I mean, the reason unattractive, I suppose, well, liberal women are liberal is because they have to date liberal men. You know, as we’ve seen with Bill Clinton, Dominique Strauss-Khan, and Anthony Weiner, we see how liberal men treat women and if I were them, I’d be angry too. [...] I mean I’ll take 69 cents on the dollar, or whatever the current feminist myth is about how much money we make, just so I never have to pay for dinner again.

Like Lecoq’s bouffon, who uses “corporeal transformation” to create the critical space necessary to mock his/her subject’s “deepest convictions” (117), Gilmour’s transformation into zombie Desdemona allows the performer to make a monster out of the Conservative icon (a task her detractors might argue is not at all difficult) and draw attention to the anti-feminism and misogyny underlying her rhetoric.

But there is a doubling to the mockery occurring in this parodic performance, as Gilmour-as-Desdemona-as-Coulter mocks Ann Coulter mocking liberal women and feminists. Coulter’s performance itself at the CPAC, which can be viewed on *YouTube*, is bouffonesque minus the grotesque physicality, as it reads like a stand-up routine by an insult comic attempting to shock her audience—like Lecoq’s bouffon, she says the unsayable and mocks what cannot be mocked. A notorious provocateur, Coulter’s outrageous views seem to be equally rooted in earnest convictions and in neoliberal goals of selling books, building her celebrity brand, and increasing her profile and influence. Coulter’s CPAC speech epitomizes the backlash against feminism described by Susan Faludi two decades earlier in the 1990s—“a concerted, conservative response to the achievements of feminism” (McRobbie 255)—and deploys several postfeminist sensibilities, particularly what Gill labels as “irony and knowingness.” Gill writes, “in postfeminist media culture, irony has become a way of ‘having it both ways,’ of expressing sexist, homophobic, and otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually meant” (“Postfeminist Media Culture” 159). We can make taboo jokes or circulate nostalgic images of femininity because sexism is understood to be a thing of the past, and feminism is understood to have done its work. People who oppose these types of representations are constructed as humourless, ugly, stupid, or members of the “feminist thought police” (161). Coulter’s use of irony is meant

to defer criticism, even while her jokes about pay equity, and later, healthcare and reproductive rights, are made against a political backdrop where women's rights continue to be threatened and dismantled. Desdemona-as-Coulter's last line in her diatribe—"You know taxes are like abortions, grotesque procedures supported by the democrats"—though delivered in the manner of a stand-up comedian, highlights the dangerous connections between neoliberalism and postfeminism, wherein deregulation, austerity, and a rolling back of government services threatens to erode feminist gains of the past.

In repeating Coulter's postfeminist performance, Gilmour-as-Desdemona foregrounds the real danger of the pundit's words by making them strange. It is no accident that this scene comes immediately before the birthing scene described earlier, connecting the seemingly laughable discourse of a figure like Coulter to the rhetoric of male political and corporate leaders past and present and the broader workings of patriarchy, violence, and neoliberalism. In laughing at the former scene, the audience becomes implicated in the latter: just as Desdemona and Ophelia give birth to baby patriarchs, the play points to our culture's complicity in nurturing the oppressive systems it critiques.



**Danya Buonostella as Ophelia (left) and Nina Gilmour as Desdemona (right) go into a kind of hypnotic trance and play out the ritual of men going to war, killing, and dying. Photographer: Johnny Hockin**

## Lived Experience and Creative Imagination

Highlighting the meaning of the word “applied” in applied theatre, Thompson writes “[it refers to] an act that takes theatre practices out of the obscure black boxes and brings them back to the ‘open air’” (19). Implied in this definition is this practice’s power to take what is hidden, buried, and masked, and expose it, much like Lecoq and Derksen’s description of the bouffon.

At first glance, one might assume that the majority of scenes in *Death Married My Daughter* are provocative, seeing as most of these scenes employ a heavy-handed approach to exposing and parodying issues that range from capitalism to war crimes. But a closer, more careful examination of the layout and structure of these scenes reveals that there is a meticulously crafted ebb and flow, push and pull, where the characters solicit the audience’s empathy and “buy in” every time they are about to provoke them to the point of pushing them too far. Jackson writes,

The theatre must provoke, if the target is truly to move people beyond the normative conventions which keep the spectator passive, the citizen obedient. Of course if you simply provoke, you run the risk of meaningless outrage—the question is what you do with that provocation and the resulting release of energy. (44)

Since the inception of Theatre of the Oppressed in the late 1970s, this genre of applied theatre has been on a journey of trying to give voice to those who are invisible by exposing the injustices that these groups experience. Applied theatre researchers and practitioners have been doing that for the past four decades, and in this last stretch, especially since Donald Trump made it into the White House, our art has had to take a step back to re-evaluate our goals and the means by which we arrive at those goals.

Feminist theory finds itself at a similar point of reflection. How, asks Sarah Banet-Weiser, are young women raised on the notions of girl power, choice, and empowerment meant to make sense of the election of a president who is unabashedly sexist and racist? What does feminist activism look like in a time when organizations dedicated to empowering women and girls co-exist with men’s rights and alt-right groups who position feminism as an oppressing force? How can movements like #metoo and Black Lives Matter sustain momentum in the face of devastating cuts to social programs and education?

*Death Married My Daughter*, a performance created by a generation of women theatre artists grappling with the contradictions of these dangerous and frightening times, provides a model of artistic resistance to fight dominant forces of oppression. Through parody, mockery, and irony, the clowns demonstrate how to skillfully seduce an audience in order to authentically engage them in collective outrage. Though this outrage may not manifest in a direct intervention in the performance itself, as in a Forum Theatre production, it still pushes the audience, in Jackson’s words, “beyond the normative conventions which keep the spectator passive, the citizen obedient” (44). In so doing, the play also encourages its audience to question, reflect upon, and also resist the individualizing forces of postfeminism and neoliberalism that it exposes.



The play's reclaiming of female power and denouncing of patriarchy also allow the performers to access hope. These young women are forcing the audience to see the world through their eyes: a world fueled by greed and corruption, one that results in not only the oppression of vulnerable people, but the dominance of a capitalist neoliberal agenda that serves the interests of a few at the expense of the majority, one that has celebrated women's empowerment only to claw back their rights. They use their "lived experience" to inform their "creative imagination," as described here by Prentki and Pammanter:

The subversive potential of theatre is located within the dialectical interaction between lived experience and the creative imagination. If *we* cannot imagine change, what hope is there for the billions oppressed by neoliberalism? But such a change will be mere fantasy unless it emerges from an analysis of reality informed by the lived experience of those who are hungry for such change. (10)

Although at first it might appear that the performers are re-affirming the victimhood of Ophelia and Desdemona by replaying their death scenes, yet a few moments later they parody the male heroes of these tragedies and those who idolize them. They mockingly confirm "[t]he tragedy of *Othello*" amidst fake tears, alluding to the fact that it was Desdemona who was murdered by her lover, and not the other way around. Julie Salverson points to the value of embracing the contradictions that lie in the depiction of tragedy through joy and pleasure, and how we can perceive, and in turn play out, the heroes in these narratives:

The clown is not a hero but she is heroic in her courage, in being available to the possible, no matter how absurd and unlikely. Pleasure, joy and fun in this context are not spectacle or escape, but rather the deadly game of living with loss, living despite failure, living even despite the humiliation of trying endlessly. (39)

Perhaps the ingredients of seduction employed by the creators of *Death Married My Daughter* are used to make the experience so much more powerful through the courageous embrace of loss, rather than a collapsing of one's agency through a tragic depiction of that loss. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Boal titled his first chapter of *Theatre of the Oppressed* "Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy." Buonastella and Gilmour's parody of the Aristotelian tragedy is in fact an embrace of Boal's methodology of implicating the audience in the structure of the narrative, through seduction and provocation, the push and pull, the lived experience and creative imagination, until we are able to perceive a solution to our oppression.

While the SCUM Manifesto may sound radical when recited in the third or post-third wave of feminism, when delivered by zombie feminist bouffons at the conclusion of a whirlwind performance featuring Ann Coulter's political speeches and birthing and eating baby fascists, Valerie Solanas's second wave battle cry does not sound so absurd. Beyond its provocative language and imagery, the SCUM Manifesto makes an urgent and compelling case for overthrowing patriarchy, capitalism, and government and starting a new order. It also offers a long-awaited catharsis to Ophelia and Desdemona, who declaim passages from the text before declaring, "Oh—I feel so much better" and "What a relief" and beginning their exit.

This same catharsis, however, is not extended to the audience, who are reminded that there is much work to do to reverse the deep-seated causes of oppression identified in the play. In the final lines of the play, Ophelia says, “I cannot go on,” to which Desdemona replies, “We must go on.” However, unlike their Beckettian counterparts Vladimir and Estragon, who utter similar last lines but remain motionless, Ophelia and Desdemona laboriously crawl away, emboldening their audience as spect-actors in these postfeminist times.

## Notes

- 1 Yasmine attended two performances of *Death Married My Daughter*, at the In the Soil Festival in St. Catharines (2015) and at Brock University’s Department of Dramatic Arts (2016); Michelle attended a performance at the Theatre Center in Toronto (2014). Buonastella and Gilmour provided us with video footage of another performance.
- 2 Both Buonastella and Gilmour are graduates of École Philippe Gaulier. They co-wrote *Death Married My Daughter* with Theatre Smith-Gilmour co-founders Dean Gilmour and Michele Smith, who also directed the production.
- 3 While postfeminism has been debated extensively in the fields of feminist media and popular culture studies, it has garnered less interest within theatre and performance studies (TPS). See Harris for a survey of the limited body of work on this topic in TPS.
- 4 See Harris, and also Melissa Poll’s “When Little is Said and Feminism is Done? Simon Stephens, The Critical Blogosphere, and Modern Misogyny.”

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