

Feminism, Truth and the Misplacement of Belief in Breach Theatre's *It's True, It's True, It's True*

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Costumes, vocal choices, and kinesics contribute to a metatheatrical production, feminist in its impulse, that tells a story of believability which maintains social and political relevance through to the present moment.

It's True, It's True, It's True is a post-verbatim play first performed in 2018, written by Billy Barrett and Ellice Stevens, and directed by Barrett. Using a “heightened theatricality that challenges received notions of the truth” (Barrett and Stevens 0:15), the play restages the trial of Agostino Tassi for the rape of Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi. In this extract, taken from Scene Six of the play, Tuzia revises her previous testimony that doubted Tassi’s pursuit of Artemisia, and admits to letting him into her house, corroborating Artemisia’s allegation. The set design creates a *mise-en-scène* that symbolically embeds the theme of justice into the stage space. Costumes, vocal choices, and kinesics contribute to a metatheatrical production, feminist in its impulse, that tells a story of believability which maintains social and political relevance through to the present moment.

In suit jackets with outsized cuffs and collars (Breach Theatre), the play’s all-female cast wear outfits almost caricatural in their embodiment of a satirised hypermasculinity. They are sociometrically significant in their mockery of “the bullying and coercion of [...] men” (Fisher), and of the legal system for its pretence of sophistication and underlying institutional bias. Allowing the actors to embody multiple roles, the costumes represent both Tassi’s image of the privileged, menacing, sexual predator on trial and the formalwear of the courtroom. Ellice Stevens—now portraying the Judge, rather than Artemisia—is in a state of partial redressing: a visual reminder of her previous nudity and physical vulnerability. After initially undressing for a tableau vivant of the painting *Susanna and the Elders*—an expression of artistic defiance and agency—she symbolically redresses while testifying to the audience and recounting her rape (25:40). As outlined by Barrett and Stevens, Artemisia’s nudity is considered, and performed with confidence (29:50). The play expresses an acute awareness of the politics of the stage’s revealed body, engaging with Leach’s assertion that “watching the

play is also importantly a *private* pleasure. The situation licenses voyeurism: in the special circumstances of the theatre, in the privacy of the darkened auditorium, the individual may indulge in the ‘gaze’, which is impossible in most social situations. Here no guilt is attached” (176). In this scene, however, the audience are invited to feel guilt, to align through the act of voyeuristic observation with Tassi’s predatory male gaze. The male stage presence is imagined and symbolic, thus the male gaze is executed by the women on stage through satirical metadramatic reenactment, and by the audience. Artemisia’s silence in this scene is undermined by the reminder of her previous nakedness found in her clothing. Now, seen with rolled up sleeves, bare feet, no suit jacket, and a relaxed physical demeanour, Stevens, the body of whom is almost impossible to divorce from her portrayal of Artemisia, embodies the casualness previously seen in Tassi’s calm control of the courtroom. Representative of the shifting power dynamic at this crucial turning point in the play, Stevens, and, by symbolic extension, Artemisia, is now afforded this casualness by Tuzia’s corroboration, suggesting a justice granted to her by a modern audience’s belief in her testimony, contrary to the justice withheld from her in her time due to the court’s insufficient punishment of Tassi.

As the scene reaches its climax, Tassi, played by Sophie Steer, speaks with the explosive anger of the enraged misogynist, and a man feeling the authority afforded to him by institutional bias collapse as Artemisia’s claim gains support in the court. Far from his measured, ostentatious manner exhibited earlier in the play, his now unravelling anger is suggestive of an attempt to regain authority through an overcompensation in volume and a hostile tone. He brands Artemisia a “whore” (43:31) and attacks Tuzia with the stereotypically sexist epithet “stupid bitch” (44:02), speaking with a misogynistic vulgarity that makes clear his representation of a contemporary sexism that weaponises an aggressively

misogynistic vocabulary. His violent anger stands in stark contrast to the quiet, self-assured rage of Artemisia, whose “anger [is] controlled and sense of justice resolute” (Fisher). Tassi, recognising his waning authority, moves downstage after his sudden outburst, speaking to the audience—the courtroom’s symbolic jury—and angling for the sympathy associated with the metatheatrical technique of direct address. When Tuzia makes the crucial admission that “sometimes [she] did open the door. Out of fear” (43:20), Steer reverts from portraying the Judge to Tassi. This transgression from an objective to a defensive, male role is suggestive of the heavy institutional bias of the patriarchal courtroom, and the subconscious need of Tassi to rush to his own defence. This shift in character almost goes unnoticed at first; both vocal tones are initially similar, and, at this point in the play, the audience has become familiar with the actors’ fluency in moving between roles. Then, exploding with an exaggerated anger, Tassi embodies the fearful element of Ruskin’s view of the grotesque as a combination of the fearful and the ludicrous (Steig). As seen throughout the production, male dominance is aligned with the grotesque, but uses a modern lexical and visual language to draw this alignment into the realm of twenty-first century gender politics. Tassi’s portrayal, in contrast to the hyperbolically satirical depictions of the Elders, for example, is subdued to create a far more menacing, and contemporarily resonant, villain. As stated by Fisher, “it is chilling to see how closely the accused man’s strategies – questioning the victim’s morality, rubbishing the evidence and nobbling the witnesses – mirror the smokescreen tactics of sexual abusers in our own time”. More insidious than the Elders, Tassi is a sexual predator aware of his privilege, and, here, as his control begins to collapse, uses it in an attempt to regain authority and ultimately suppress the truth.

The production’s set design, too, is symbolic of the play’s commitment to truth.

Performed on Luke W. Robson's "austere steel stools" (Fisher) and set against the backdrop of two looming ladders, joined at the top and covered in buckets, the scene is set in what is simultaneously a courtroom and an artist's studio (Barrett and Stevens 24:20), physicalising the play's blurring of judicial and artistic evidence. The ladders form the silhouette of scales: a cruel symbol of the justice withheld from Artemisia. The courtroom should be a morally neutral setting, but instead, in its prejudice and failure to rightfully place belief in Artemisia's testimony, suppresses the truth it ostensibly champions. This atmospheric symbol of justice, therefore, becomes ironic in its dominance over a stage space within which the biases embedded in the legal institution are denounced. The buckets positioned on the ladders reveal their significance at the play's climax; representative of thumb screws, they are the means of Artemisia's torture, and their consistent presence onstage means her suffering at the hands of an unbelieving legal system is symbolically built into the stage space. Established before even entering the theatre by the crucial indeterminacy of the play's deictic title, the misplacement of belief is the story's true miscarriage of justice, the critique of which is the play's superobjective. The politics of consent, too, are thematised; the Judge's over-enunciated double entendre "did you let him in?" (42:55), euphemistic of the scrutiny of consent, is directed at Tuzia, rather than Artemisia, reflecting the court's consignment of the debate of consent to those it does not directly concern. As a courtroom drama punctuated by satirical reenactments, mocking asides and direct addresses to the audience, the play engages with Shklovsky's theory of *ostranenie* as audience expectations of courtroom procedures are defamiliarised to highlight their embedded prejudice. By interweaving a feminist criticism with the familiar genre of the legal drama, Breach Theatre belongs to a lineage of feminist theatre companies that condemn the problematic patriarchal operations of theatrical tradition and form (Canning 529).

Tonally, the scene is more mimetic than others in the play. It marks a moment in which the trial's attention is recalled to its apparent aim: to decide Tassi's culpability, rather than to debate Artemisia's sexual morality and concomitant honesty. The metatheatrical techniques exhibited in earlier scenes are shed in a moment of simplification, in which Tuzia's testimony—one of the few moments in which female characters are allowed to speak at length without being interrupted—centres the objective of plain truth, rather than a wryly stylised one. Tuzia's admission of the fallacy of her previous testimony is particularly poignant and cathartic in a modern, post-MeToo context, as her initial testimony against Artemisia is felt as a failure of the 'sisterhood' women are encouraged to uphold and support, and Artemisia's experience of the trial is made all the more tragic for her disbelief by another woman. Now, with glassy eyes, nervous hands and a gradual vocal amplification as she becomes more emotional during her testimony, Tuzia grants Artemisia the belief needed to shift the courtroom's power dynamics in her favour. This emotional shift, coinciding with the garnering of female support, is suggestive of the persuasive power of the 'sisterhood' within the fundamentally patriarchal setting of the courtroom.

Through the set design's symbolic centring of the justice the play seeks for Artemisia, costumes that both satirise an aggressive masculinity and allow for an exploration of the stage's revealed versus the clothed body, and by exposing the violent anger of the misogynist losing grip on his institutional privilege, Breach Theatre calls into question the misplacement of belief still seen in modern rape trials. The play uses a carefully weighted balance of satire and sincerity, and, in this scene, simplifies its metatheatrical elements to draw out from its satire an honesty that offers a poignant feminist criticism, drawing parallels between the gender politics of the Renaissance and those of the

modern era.

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