

# **Bending Gender and Acting Theory: Performing essays by Goethe and Cocteau on the theatrical benefits of cross-dressing**

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## ***Abstract***

*In this article the author investigates Johann Wolfgang Goethe's and Jean Cocteau's strikingly interrelated essays on acts of female impersonation and the implications on theatre theory that both emphatically point out. In a second step the article seeks to explore how both articles translated into performances that resulted from the author's practice as research projects, which used the essays themselves as parts of the performance scripts. In particular the performances tried to respond to Goethe's and Cocteau's focus on the individual virtuoso travesty with a counter concept that employed the use of choir and a composition of theatrical means (text, music, images) to achieve a different kind of "self-conscious illusion" (Goethe) – a transparently fabricated play on illusion and disillusion, gender and androgyny, performance and research.*

## ***Keywords***

Theatre Theory

Gender performance

Female Impersonation

Practice as Research

Cocteau

Goethe

In the summer of 2002, the theatre department of the University of Hildesheim (Germany) undertook a practical project that attempted to devise theatrical performances out of theoretical writings on theatre theory, mainly those originating from the late eighteenth century. Five devising groups dealt with essays written by Goethe, Schiller, Diderot and Lessing, re-enacted and questioned their theatrical missions and related them to more recent theories by Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Einar Schleef and Peter Handke.

One of these theories (and, consequently, one of the five projects) dealt with issues of body, gender and theatre theory – a terminological love triangle, as it seemed after some

research. Or should it be by accident that from Goethe to Jean Cocteau, there were several essays<sup>1</sup> on the art of acting to be found that relate their observations or even models to cross-gender performances, i.e. to make-believe-alterations of what we assume to be a fundamentally distinctive feature of the human body.

I was involved in this project, called ‘Frauen in Anzug’ (Women in suits),<sup>2</sup> as a supervisor and director. I also initiated and directed a follow-up project at the Stadttheater Hildesheim six months later, which carried on to investigate the combination of acting theory and gender performance.<sup>3</sup> While the first project was based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1788 essay ‘Frauenrollen auf dem römischen Theater durch Männer gespielt’ (Women's Parts Played by Men in the Roman Theatre), the second, called ‘Barbette’ took its major direction from Jean Cocteau’s ‘Le numéro Barbette’ (The Act Barbette), written in 1926.

The questions I want to raise in this article seek to investigate the particular connection between acting theory and bending gender made by Goethe and Cocteau and, with reference to the two projects, how this translated into two performances.

### ***Goethe and Cocteau***

There are some astonishing analogues between the key passages of the two texts,<sup>4</sup> despite the historical gap. Let me highlight the major argumentative connections both authors make between cross-dressing and acting artistry. Goethe's text was written after his return from his travels to Italy. His generally disapproving remarks on the Roman Carnival and the foolishness of its participants are counterpointed by his much more positive observations on the efforts made by female impersonators on stage as well as during the carnivalesque festivities:

The young men who devote themselves to female roles have a special passion for showing that they are masters of their art. They observe the facial expressions, the movements, the behaviour of women with the utmost care, they try to imitate them and give their voices suppleness and sweetness, even though they cannot change their deeper timbre. In short, they try to estrange themselves as much as possible from their own sex. [...] A double attraction [doppelter Reiz] arises [...] from the fact that these actors are not women but portray [vorstellen] women. The young man has studied the characteristics of the female sex in its essence and bearing; he has learned to know them and give them life as an artist; he does not portray himself but a third nature actually foreign to him. (Goethe 1993 [1788]: 48-9)

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<sup>1</sup> Lesley Ferris, for example, quotes Alfred Jarry, Guy Boas, and Jan Kott.

<sup>2</sup> The German title has a double meaning, because ‘im Anzug’ can mean both ‘in a suit’, but also ‘to be on the advance’. As our project group comprised 13 female students and 1 male student, the whole idea of men playing women was reversed from the start.

<sup>3</sup> See the end of the article for detailed cast lists.

<sup>4</sup> For further individual observations see: Crowson 1976, Davy 1992, Ferris 1993 and Franko 1992.

Goethe's argument, why 'the ancients, at least in the best periods for art and morality, did not permit women on stage'<sup>5</sup> (Goethe 1993 [1788]: 48), is only partially misogynistic: he *does* suggest that women on stage, even if they are 'clever and understanding actress[es]' (50), will only be able to present themselves with 'unmitigated truthfulness [unmittelbare Wahrhaftigkeit]' and reveal their 'nature' (which indicates his lower esteem of their acting abilities). He argues that men, however, when giving a 'successful imitation [glückliche Nachahmung]' (50) of women after intensive study, entertain 'not through nature but through art' and make us contemplate 'not an individuality, but a result' (50). The point I am interested in though is neither Goethe's misogyny or Cocteau's gay fascination in the acrobat performances of female impersonator and tight-rope artist Vander Clyde (alias Barbette), but in both of their concepts of artistry connected to the cross-dressing performance. Cocteau argues along the same lines as Goethe when he stresses how grateful he is for such a

remarkable lesson of professionalism on the stage, [...] a feat of mimicry, a work of art, in which he impersonates and sums up in one all the women he has observed, becoming then the typical female in such a convincing manner that he eclipses the prettiest women appearing before or after him. (Cocteau 1988a [1926]: 4)<sup>6</sup>

Goethe and Cocteau agree in their pleasure in and appreciation of the art of female impersonation, but engage different arguments to support their shared claim that the cross-gender performances they have seen should be considered paradigmatic for the theatre and its performances in general. Goethe's central argument lies in the artistic nature of the impersonation, the pleasure consists in the 'double attraction' (Goethe 1993 [1788]: 50) he has in watching them due to a paradoxical phenomenon:

I felt a pleasure I had not felt before and noticed that many others shared it. Wondering about the reason for this, I think that I have found the answer in the fact that in these performances the idea of imitation, the thought of art, remained keen throughout and that by means of skilful play only a kind of self-conscious illusion was produced. (Goethe 1993 [1788]: 49)<sup>7</sup>

The paradox of the 'self-conscious illusion' is certainly one of the key phrases of the essay. Goethe's appraisal of this style of acting is based on the simultaneity of two attractions for the audience: there is an illusion through skilful imitation, but at the same time an awareness of the cross dressers' state as actors guaranteed by the undeniable and ultimately undisguisable

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<sup>5</sup> Please note the analogy with Jean Cocteau, who claimed that, thanks to Vander Clyde, he understands, 'that it was not only for the sake of decency that the great nations and cultures had men play women's parts' (Cocteau 1988a [1926]: 4).

<sup>6</sup> In the performance we used the German translation by Reinhard Schmidt; see: Cocteau, Jean (1988b [1926]).

<sup>7</sup> In the German original the corresponding passages are highlighted: Wondering about the reason for this, I think that I have found the answer in the fact *that in these performances the idea of imitation, the thought of art, remained keen throughout* and that by means of *skilful play* only a kind of *self-conscious illusion* was produced.

difference of sex between the male actor and his female character. In Goethe's terms, we enjoy 'seeing not the thing itself but its imitation'. The natural difference forces the actor to employ 'art'. For Goethe, that means: careful observation (48), passion (48) but also estrangement (49): the performance is the result of a reflective and artistic process, we are not confronted 'with the thing itself, but with the result of the thing' (49).

The link to Cocteau and also the major difference between the two models lies in the conception of 'illusion'. Goethe takes pleasure in the reflective (and therefore self-conscious) achievement of creating a theatrical illusion that we can fall for, whilst always being aware of the artistry it takes to create it. Cocteau equally stresses how theatre should always strive for creating a perfectly illusional world, but the metaphors employed around that concept are much to do with magic and deceit:

Don't forget that we are in the theatre's magic light, in this 'malice-box' where truth is of no value, where what is natural is worthless, where short people become tall and tall ones short, where only card tricks and sleights of hand whose difficulty the public doesn't even suspect can manage to hold firm. (Cocteau 1988a [1926]: 4)

As Mark Franko has it, 'the theatrical lesson alluded to in the title of Cocteau's "Leçon", however, refers to the skilful maintenance of a lie as a sort of balancing act' (Franko 1992: 598). Cocteau describes and endorses the temporarily complete suspension of disbelief for Barquette's audience, but it is equally essential for his theory that the transformation into the female impersonation and out of it, is witnessed and described. Cocteau watches Vander Clyde in his dressing room:

Even with his fall make-up on - as sumptuous as a brand-new pastel box are - with his jaws covered in a sort of an enamelled gloss that glitters, a with his body plastered with an unreal powder, this strange little devil, this Saint-Just in dreams, this coachman of Death, still remains a man bound to his double by a single hair. It is not until he pulls on his blond wig held by a simple elastic band around his ears that he will take up - while putting a bunch of hairpins in his mouth - the slightest postures of a woman doing her hair. He then stands up, goes and puts his rings on. The transformation is complete. Jekyll is Hyde. Yes, Hyde! Now, I am scared. I turn away. I crush my cigarette. I take off my hat. It is my turn to be intimidated. (Cocteau 1988a [1926]: 2f.)

In this ironic description of an intimidating moment, Cocteau admires the technical mastery as well as the uncanny, the inexplicable; something Goethe's rationalism would not have indulged in. The transformation itself, like the illusion created by it, is perfect, mastered and beyond rational explanation. When Cocteau describes the unveiling of Barquette by Vander Clyde, this moment does not give the audience the pleasure Goethe describes (seeing the act and the result of reflection), but leaves them gasping:

Imagine what a let down it would be for some if, at the end of this unforgettable lie, Barquette was simply to remove his wig. But this is exactly what he does after the fifth curtain call and the

let down virtually takes place. One can hear a growing babble of voices and see faces and turning red with embarrassment." (Cocteau 1988a [1926], 7)

The disillusionment is disturbing, because the actual illusion was never perfectly achieved, as Kate Davy comments:

What Cocteau finds so compelling about Barquette's turn is his ability to seduce the eye of the beholder into believing he is a woman when the empirical evidence suggests otherwise. He describes how Barquette's gown, with its tulle shoulder straps, does not conceal the absence of breasts and how his acrobatic act demands the use of his body and muscles in such a way that 'he doesn't look very feminine'. (Davy 1992: 223)

For Cocteau the theatre is a perfect piece of machinery that transcends the limits of our empirical world and the merely logical perception of it. The illusions it creates are not simultaneous with their unveilings, and the unveilings themselves leave the audience pleasantly disturbed. Goethe, however, enjoys the co-presence of the perfect illusion with the visible craftsmanship of the cross-dressed actor, which creates, in his words, 'a third nature actually foreign to him' (p. 49). The idea of the 'third nature' again finds a Cocteauian transformation: where Goethe refers to the theatrical 'surplus value' of the female impersonation, Cocteau discovers a third entity, that he actually calls 'supernatural':

The reason for Barquette's success lies in the fact that he appeals to the instinct of different audiences as if they were one while he reconciles conflicting opinions without being aware of it. Indeed, he appeals to those who see the woman in him, to those who sense the man in him, as well as to others whose souls are moved by the supernatural sex of beauty. (Cocteau 1988a [1926]: 6)

Both arguments are based, though, on a dual system: the 'double attraction' (Goethe 1993 [1788]: 49), the 'duplicitous nature of this "illusion of woman", this absent presence' (Davy on Cocteau's *Barquette*, 1992: 23). Both of these dichotomies ask for an ontology of two worlds. This seems to be ensured in the theatre through the biological nature of the human body as its dominant sign system. Again there is a difference between Goethe and Cocteau, and I am pointing it out because of its consequences for the conceptual shift between the two performances based on the different texts.

For Goethe the artistic appreciation of the cross-dressing performance depends heavily on an unquestionable difference of the two sexes. There is a need and a desire to stabilize cultural order by taking 'male' and 'female' as *a priori* facts. Manfred Weinberg argues along this line when concluding his essay 'What makes a (wo)man a (wo)man?':

If difference is fundamentally both the condition of the possibility of culture and its trademark, then every culture has an interest in stabilizing such differences – and the difference of male and female would in this case be a major point of reference. By relating the difference, that constitutes culture, to nature, one succeeds in eliminating the contingency of every cultural system, the

fact that it has its cause only within itself, and that it therefore could break down at any time.<sup>8</sup>  
(Weinberg 1998: 192)

It is not by accident that Goethe's cross-dressing experience takes place during carnival. Carnival and all the resulting modes of performance, such as *commedia dell'arte*, circus, music hall, *variété*, were based on the principle that a controlled toppling of a given hierarchical, social or sexual order would ensure the persistence of this order in the long run.

Goethe still bases assumptions on this order, and *Frauen im Anzug* used the carnivalesque principle as a dramaturgical thread: the whole performance took place in a dressing-room situation that displayed the performers in various stages of transformation into their various stereotypes of maleness or femaleness (see pictures 1 & 2). The working titles for some of the characters were: Lolita, School-girl, Blonde, th'e Tuxedo, Femme Fatale, etc. Due to the dressing-room situation though, these clichéd gender roles were presented in constant change and in various intermediate stages. As all characters started in white neutral bathrobes, stripped to the formal men's suits they wore underneath, and transformed from there, you could see odd in-between mixtures or rather simultaneities – 'double attractions' if you wish – like one of the characters appearing in a neat blouse and white men's underwear, another displaying stockings and a formal shirt with tie.



[Picture: 1 dressing room]

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<sup>8</sup> Wenn Differenz grundsätzlich sowohl Bedingung der Möglichkeit als auch Kennzeichen von Kultur ist, dann muß es jeder Kultur darum gehen, solche Differenzen zu stabilisieren – und die von Männlichem und Weiblichem wäre dabei ihre vornehmlichste Bezugsgröße. Indem die kulturstiftende Differenz auf Natur zurückgeführt wird, gelingt es, die Kontingenz jeden kulturellen Systems, die Tatsache, daß es seinen Grund nur in sich selbst hat, dass es somit auch jederzeit in sich zusammenstürzen kann, vergessen zu machen. (My translation.)

<sup>9</sup> All photographs were taken by Uta Birkenberg and Georg Werner.



[Pic: 2 gender stages]

For Cocteau, the stability of two supposedly unimpeachable sexes is considerably weakened: the fascination arises from the skilful impersonation, but when Vander Clyde displays his ‘real’ sex by taking off the wig, he actually *plays* a man on top of being one, because his sexual identity itself seems to be ice too thin to walk on:

To become a man again, to let the film run backwards still does not satisfy him. It also requires the truth to be translated and to retain a certain appeal if it is to convince us as forcibly as did the lie. That is the reason why *Barbette*, once he has snatched off his wig, plays the part of a man, lets his shoulders play, spreads his hands, displays his muscles, exaggerates the sporty gait of a golf player. (Cocteau 1988a [1926]: 7)

The two sexes are not taken for granted any longer; they have to be performatively installed. The ‘supernatural sex of beauty’ that Cocteau refers to is the fine line (or the high wire) that *Barbette* walks on between impersonation of both male and female roles. Consequently our second production, *Barbette*, was less interested in cross-dressing than in theatrically exploring the fascination by (and intimidation through) androgyny or sexual uncertainty, as characterized in Cocteau's essay and a series of other prose writings. What follows seeks to explore in more detail the theatrical means and strategies we employed in staging both texts, in the search for a dramatic form that would respond to (and critically evaluate) the individual philosophical scope of each essay.

### ***Frauen im Anzug and Barbette***

The performance of Goethe's essay began with a prologue that reflected Goethe's visit of a Roman theatre performance as a starting point for all his theorising and introduced the audience to Goethe's premises. The group of performers sat in white bathrobes in an amphitheatre-like half-circle around a spotlighted area on the floor: in the circle of light you could see the dolls ‘Barbie’ and ‘Ken’, first naked, then, interrupted by two blackouts, dressed and finally

cross-dressed. To this scenario the performers addressed Goethe's text,<sup>10</sup> as if they were caught in excited watching and contemplation. This prologue established the connection between the fascination of the theatrical act, gender performance and acting theory, and also played on a popular culture note, which was to be part of the overall aesthetic of the performance. After this, the audience was confronted with a collage of texts, songs, choreographies and images that juxtaposed Goethe's text with theatrical actions, with the intention of casting a new light on it. The following 30-minute performance, with its choreographed changing-room scenarios and tableaux of postures and masquerades, put three dominant theatrical strategies into action that aimed to transform Goethe's assumptions and their implications into a sensual discourse:

1. The production made the connection of gender and performance, as theorized most prominently by Judith Butler, tangible in gender poses and postures, in plays on gender stereotypes, and in the staging and un-staging of sexual orders.
2. It dissolved the (sexual) individuality of each performer's body into a series of bodies – a theatrical choir.
3. It challenged the dichotomy of male and female by, as I would like to call it, a technique of stratification: the addition of layers of meaning, layers of gender references.

#### *a) The Staging and un-staging of sexual orders*

Judith Butler has repeatedly stressed the performativity of gender. Goethe's double attraction would not have been possible under her premises: Goethe's fascination lies in an imitation that is not a 'simple imitation'<sup>11</sup> – due to the fact that one witnesses the simultaneity of the actor and his part, which are, supposedly, clearly distinguishable through the difference of their sexes. If, however, one starts to call the stability of biological sex into question, as Judith Butler does, things get a little more complicated:

In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief. [...] What is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. (Butler 1988: 520)

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<sup>10</sup> 'I did not attend these Roman comedies without preconceived notions; but without giving it much thought I soon found myself won over. I felt a pleasure I had not felt before and noticed that many others shared it. Wondering about the reason for this, I think that I have found the answer in the fact that in these performances the idea of imitation, the thought of art, remained keen throughout and that by means of skilful play only a kind of self-conscious illusion was produced.' (Goethe 1993 [1788]: 49)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Goethe, Johann Wolfgang (1984b [1789]): 168.

The production used poses and postures to make this notion theatrically evident: a male student with a tuxedo jacket slipped it gently over his bare shoulders creating the impression of a low neckline (see picture 3), a female student mimed a masculine walk and put on a painted moustache, another female student put on a stocking mask and a wide-cut parka, disguising her sex almost completely. In these examples, the transformations of gender, its performativity, were made explicit: they happened on stage, not behind a curtain, and the female, male or neutral poses were retracted quickly.



[Picture: 3 Transformation of a Tuxedo]

In the course of the performance, the cast, which consisted of thirteen women and one man, showed a development from the neutral uniformity of white bathrobes, via male uniformity of business suits (worn by women though!), to various sketches of femininity. Gender quite obviously became a prop in the performance. Sexual identities were put on and taken off like costumes, thus reflecting the processual character of gender, or what Judith Butler calls the ‘constituted social temporality’<sup>12</sup> of gender.

Another strategy of staging sexual order follows a feminist reading of Goethe's text, offered, for example, by Birgit Wiens or Lesley Ferris, but also treats it with irony. In her study *‘Grammatik’ der Schauspielkunst: die Inszenierung der Geschlechter in Goethes klassischem Theater* (*The ‘grammar’ of the art of acting: The staging of the sexes in Goethe's classical theatre*), Wiens claims that the logical consequence of Goethe's appraisal of male impersonation of the female is an ‘extinction of the female body within the theatrical code’.<sup>13</sup> In the performance, this became a satirical game: for example, when the one male performer gave the text cue, ‘the ancients, at least in the best periods for art and morality, did not permit women on stage’, twelve female performers invaded the stage (see picture 4). The following catwalk up and down the stage was an oscillation though, between a self-confident entrance and an immediate retreat. In the performance, all the women were then turned into men on the in-

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Die Auslöschung weiblicher Physis im theatralischen Kode’ (Wiens 2000: 99. My translation).

structions of the man: this is how they are allowed to stay. The one man adjusting the women's male outfit became an image for the significance of the 'male gaze' setting the standard, which was essential for Goethe's theatre theory and theatre system. Wiens indicates that,

the actress, even after having entered the 'patriarchal sign system' theatre, and despite her physical presence on stage, remains as a concept of the 'other' and stays absent in an almost paradoxical way in so far as she is only capable of reproducing those constructions of femininity which the grammar of the art of acting has already preconditioned for her and, as it were, prompts in her. (Wiens 2000: 92f.)<sup>14</sup>

In the performance this notion was present, but also became reversed when the women slowly took over: the male voice became lost in the sound of more and more female voices and was finally silenced. If Goethe wanted to say, as Lesley Ferris puts it, 'that in performance men make better women' (Ferris 1993: 51), then twelve women acting and dressing like men create a theatrical counterpoint and a comical subversion of this claim by their sheer numerical superiority.



[picture: 4 Bathrobe Row]

#### *b) Dissolution of the (sexual) individuality of the body into a series of bodies*

Goethe's theory of the actor stresses not only the self-consciousness of the actor, but also his capacity to create a perfect illusion, his virtuosity. He refers to those who manage to do so as

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<sup>14</sup> 'Zeigt dieser Entwurf, zeichentheoretisch gewendet, womöglich an, daß die Schauspielerin [...] auch nach ihrem Eintritt in das „patriarchiale Zeichensystem“ Theater und trotz ihrer physischen Präsenz auf der Bühne immer als das „Andere“ konzipiert wird und dort in einer geradezu paradoxen Weise abwesend bleibt, insofern als sie nur jene Weiblichkeitskonstruktionen zu reproduzieren vermag, die die ‚Grammatik‘ der Schauspielkunst ihr vorbestimmt und gleichsam souffliert?' (My translation).

This reading is indirectly supported by Carol Martin, who, in her essay 'Brecht, Feminism and Chinese Theatre', points out, that 'in China in the 1930s, casting women in women's roles was a radical new form of gender ideology. The resulting representation of gender freed women from the formalism invented by men and encoded in the performances of female impersonators. [...] For the Chinese *xin nixing* movement, cross-gender casting was the major means of excluding women from the stage. Women playing women was the radical new means of putting the physical signs of the actor and the performer's body in historical context. [...] Women played] themselves onstage as a radical act referring both to the changing needs of modern daily life and the representational apparatus of traditional theatre. [...] In the context of a long tradition of female impersonation, women onstage may have appeared less real than their fictional representations.' (Martin 1999: 82f.).

‘masters of their art’ (Goethe 1993 [1788]: 48). In the performance, we deliberately tried to come up with an alternative quality of performing to address this demand of virtuosity by, again, translating Goethe's ideal into a different form, thus trying to avoid a ‘simple imitation’ of what he portrays. Hence, the decision to perform as a choir rather than laying the onus on the single performer was more than just making a virtue out of necessity. It was a shift in focus: the self-conscious illusion, as a result of an actor’s outstanding individual ability, is not enacted, but replaced by the principle of seriality.

Goethe's admiration of the simultaneity of the convincing signified and the skilful signifier, mentioned above, was translated in our performance through splitting up the text into dialogical fragments, and characters and gender into partial features. The essay was mostly performed as a score of voices and movements in a clearly formalized manner. The ‘ingredients’ of the experiment were: unifying costumes, a unified movement (the joint ‘catwalk’), and spreading the text among all twelve performers, thus ignoring questions of ‘character’. At the same time the individual variations in movement and speech display a variety of stereotypical gender poses or tones of voice. Throughout the performance the text’s subject is serialized; the means of expression – posture, attitude, voice and movement – have become mere parameters, features, or quotations that can be put on and taken off like costumes.

By this multiplication of the supposedly highly individual, the issue of gender is brought into play, is questioned and disarmed. The virtuosity of a group's interaction on stage replaces the virtuosity of a single actor and makes an aesthetic statement: In this performance, fascination arises not from witnessing a self-conscious illusion but rather a self-conscious *allusion*. The performers do not represent roles, do not act ‘as if’, but make allusions to acts of gender constitution.<sup>15</sup> The fascination that we hoped would arise is one that comes from the playful and reflective nature in which the performers are bending gender and acting theory.

In this sense, the production also highlights where the aesthetics of our theatre differ from Goethe's conceptions. The student on stage is not so much a self-conscious actor as a self-conscious multi-functional theatre personality. The double attraction is different from Goethe’s: it lies in the obviousness that everyone on stage knows what and why they perform. One can see performers who derive pleasure from presenting their confrontation and analysis of theatre theories theatrically, and that is *physically*. Their bodies become the medium of this confrontation and presentation. We witness a sensualization of academic theory via an embodiment of theory, but vice versa we also witness an almost discursive approach towards

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Allusion’ in German is *Anspielung*. The core of this term is *Spiel* = play!

their individual bodies. Self-consciousness here means: bringing one's body into play, well aware of its effects, of the impressions it makes. This also means exploring the limits of where Goethe's illusion is applicable, and where, due to a lack of technique, one has to make strategic use of effects of authenticity.

*c) Stratification: the addition of layers of gender reference*

Given the clear dominance of female members in the cast, it soon became obvious that text and stage action would have to be counterpoints to each other rather than affirm each other. The performance never tried to execute Goethe's credo, but confronted it with theatrical action as well as with other texts in order to create a tension with them.

In the performance, one could see 13 women dressing up as men while talking about a man dressed as a woman – if you add Judith Butler's question whether at all we may take the performing women's gender for granted, then already we are confronted with several layers of gender reference.

In another scene, one could watch the ontology of two worlds being torpedoed even more dramatically: one of the female performers unbuttoned her blouse and displayed her breasts while speaking into a microphone. The gender certainty you would have expected from that moment was subverted, however, through the text she presented: it was an excerpt from an Internet homepage for trans-gender activities, that gives practical advice to men who want to pass for women convincingly; in this case explicit instructions to a man on how to tuck and tape his penis in order to hide it even under a tight dress. Meanwhile, the performer taped her breasts, making them vanish. While she gave us a supposedly certain insight into what sex she belongs to, she talked about and showed us how relative our perception is, how dependent on a cultural framework, a certain cultural scope (often enough *cinema*-scope) that guides our view of the human body. She altered her body, if only temporarily, disguising her sex and thus making a theatrical statement: gender stability is a result of cultural agreements rather than a god- or nature-given entity. In other words, namely those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the body is 'an historical idea' rather than a 'natural species' (1962: 170).

This notion was also very influential in the devising process for *Barbette*. In making the collage of texts that were framed and interrupted by large excerpts of Cocteau's essay, which served as a central thread, we collected an historical range of literary conceptions of the human body, particularly the androgynous body. For example, the performance started with a part of Plato's *Symposium*, where Plato describes the human beings originally of three gen-

ders, the third ‘Androgynous’ uniting both genders in one circular ‘man/woman’. This group then became too powerful and was punished by the gods by cutting its members into two halves. Other texts includes the eponymous hero’s description of an androgynous ice-skater in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, who himself is introduced to us as a figure who finds himself sexually reversed after a long sleep. Next to the poetic transfigurations of the androgynous, we also included, among others, the account of a French gynaecologist of the nineteenth century, who investigated the ambiguous genitals of a hermaphrodite and suggested the measures to be taken to determine surgically the sex of the patient (in Foucault 1980: 124-128).

The literary variations on the theme of androgyny found two major translations into the theatrical staging: we strove to find ways of using our theatrical means, as well as an acting style, that would, like the third sex, fall between two stools, that would blur boundaries, sometimes quite literally, sometimes metaphorically speaking.



[Picture: 5 Plato Prologue]

The prologue<sup>16</sup> (see picture 5), for example, was presented by all seven members of the cast behind a piece of gauze lit from behind. The resulting image was that of the actors, backlit, and a second slightly larger outline created by their shadows. The exact physical contours and the sexual identities of the speakers remained somewhat opaque. This already introduced a visual technique of the production – to let the images linger between a sensual and a semiotic appeal, to be abstract and naturalistic at the same time, self-referential as well as symbolic. The tableau for the Platonic prologue was a merely suggestive image, a visual challenge for the audience, who for minutes would only see the blurred outline of the actors

<sup>16</sup> ‘The shape of each human being was a rounded whole, with back and sides forming a circle. Each one had four hands and the same number of legs, and two identical faces on a circular neck. They had one head for both the faces, which were turned in opposite directions, four ears, two sets of genitals, and everything else was as you would imagine from what I’ve said so far. [...] The reason why have there were the city three genders, and why they were as described, is that the parent of the male gender was originally the sun, that of the female gender the earth, that of the combined gender the moon, because the moon is a combination of sun and earth. They were around, and so was the way they moved, because they took after their parents.’ (Plato 1999: 22f.)

and had to let themselves in for a different perceptive quality, but the double outlined shapes also summoned up the duplicitous nature of Plato's 'Androgynous', while at the same time evoking the situation of the *allegory of the cave* with all its philosophical connotations.

A later scene played with ambiguities of presenting and representing, showing and embodiment, radiating and projecting. While one of the actors presented a part of Cocteau's essay ('When he emerges, he throws dust in the eyes of the audience [...]'), the other members of the cast, one by one, positioned themselves next to a succession of slides on the piece of gauze (see picture 6). The projected image would show the individual actor in a gender-clichéd role from within the world of the circus: the ballerina, the wrestler, the lady with the boa, the animal trainer. While portrayed in flamboyant costumes on the slides, the actor would appear in a neutral pose, dressed in black trousers and a white shirt, holding up a single part of the original costume as a memento.



[Picture: 6 Projections]

We set the collage in an, again, ambiguous, combination of a tiny orchestra pit, a circus arena and a film theatre within which the actors constantly oscillated between insinuating characters and abandoning them again. They played with flexible, never quite tangible impersonations, establishing something like a 'third nature' beyond the actor and the character, both of which were allusively present *and* absent at the same time. Complementing this, all members of the cast were also musicians on stage, and while some of the music simply added to the overall revue style as numbers and songs, it also frequently changed to being incidental music. The paradox was that this music would be non-diegetic, but nonetheless played live by the characters. There was, for example. a scene where one of the actors, Andreas Torwesten, recited Dr. Chesnet's report on the above-mentioned investigation of the genitals of a hermaphrodite. The other cast members accompanied this report

collectively on a vibraphone. Their position at the instrument (see picture 7), as well as a brief theatrical prelude (putting on gloves etc.), established the vibraphone as an operating table; the mallets became scalpels and swabs. Performing music and creating a suggestive image that poignantly alluded to the hermaphrodite's examination were one thing, simultaneous and only seemingly mutually exclusive.



[Picture: 7 Operating Table]

In terms of the theatre theory which Cocteau derives from his admiration of Barbette's performative clockwork-precision, we tried to translate that as well, similarly to the Goethe-project, into a form that wouldn't be mere mimicry. We tried to represent the metaphor of the machine-like perfection that it needs to establish a convincing and magical illusion in the overall musicality of the performance: like a musical clock, the theatrical action would maintain a rhythmical flow to which, in addition, the inanimate parts of the theatrical machinery were subjected. We made efforts to time and choreograph all the set changes. These would occasionally break free and become an autonomous part of the performance. The orchestra pit/*manège*, for example, was a half-moon-shaped stage element on wheels, which, during the *Orlando* episode, was spun in neat accordance with accompanying music, turning one of the actresses like a musical clock figurine. The musicalization of most of the theatrical actions,<sup>17</sup> the striving for musical accuracy in the use of language, movement, props, projections and machinery, was our way of learning from Cocteau's lesson of theatre-craftsmanship.

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<sup>17</sup> I even ended up writing a score for the first scene, which combined the introduction of Vander Clyde, alias Barbette, with the performers cleaning and tuning their instruments, in order to shape all the ideas they had come up with during improvisation into a musical form, treating their actions as much as motifs as possible.

## Conclusion

‘Do we *truly* need a true sex?’ (Foucault 1980: vii), Michel Foucault asks in his introduction to the memoirs of the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin. The performance of *Barbette* raises this question as theatrical variations on a theme, and translates the historical fascinations and rejections of androgyny into theatrical experiences of ambiguity. *Frauen im Anzug*, however, makes use of the performers’ bodies in order to explore the limits of an acting theory that is based on gender certainties and preconceptions about female acting, which we find obsolete nowadays. And yet Goethe’s preoccupation, his double attraction felt in a theatre performance, is still one of the most powerful motors for theatre performers and audiences: to be lost between certainties, feeling that you cannot pin down what you are seeing on stage, having more than one option of meaning present simultaneously; this is what makes theatre a live challenge to our perceptions, a challenge that does not even stop at the actors’ bare skin.

Goethe’s theory of acting was revolutionary at its time, and theatre personalities up until Brecht, Cocteau and others were, consciously or not, indebted to it. What our performance tried to demonstrate was how inspiring a confrontation with these texts still is, and at the same time, what theatre that tries to position itself beyond the ‘male gaze’ and beyond representational virtuosity could look like.

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## Cast Lists

'Frauen in Anzug': Devised by Nina Baritsch, Julia Bihl, Anne Bonfert, Kaja Brandenburger, Sarah Bühlmann, Knut Gabel, Tina Müller, Rieke Oberländer, Simone Reindell, Barbara Rulinski, Fabienne Schachtler, Julia Schrook, Lisa Stepf, Hanna Wanders; Supervision/Direction: David Roesner, Thorsten zum Felde. Universität Hildesheim, première on 20 June 2002.

'Barquette': Performers: Godehard Giese, Stefanie Petrowitz, Andreas Torwesten. Stage design: Christina Nägele. Music: Thorsten zum Felde. Director: David Roesner. Stadttheater Hildesheim, première on 2 November 2002.

## **Contributor details**

Dr. David Roesner is lecturer in drama at the University of Exeter, after having previously worked at the Universität Hildesheim, Germany. His recent publications cover a diverse range of subjects: from the musicality of theatre performances (*Theater als Musik*, Tübingen 2003), to place and space in scenic media (*Szenische Orte – Mediale*, co-edited with Geesche Wartemann and Volker Wortmann, Hildesheim 2005) to comic strategies of the Commedia dell'arte and Silent Slapstick Films ('*Zweideutigkeit als komisches Erfolgsrezept*', in: *Maske und Kothurn*, 4/2005, *Komik. Ästhetik. Theorien. Vermittlungsstrategien*). David Roesner also works as a director and musician.

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