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No Men, No Boats: Directing and Dance Dramaturgy for Jaclyn Backhaus' *Men on Boats*

By Eero Laine

One of the first things that many people observe about Jaclyn Backhaus' play *Men on Boats* is that there are no men and there are no boats. Backhaus set out to write a play about the historic journey of John Wesley Powell and his crew as they traversed the Green and Colorado Rivers into the Grand Canyon in the late-1800s. As Backhaus was trying to finish writing the play, she describes being struck by the fact that "I was writing a play that I would never be able to be seen in or take part in."[1] So, she decided to tell the story another way, wherein none of the historically male characters are played by men. In a casting note, Backhaus explains: "The characters in *Men on Boats* were historically cisgender white males. The cast should be made up entirely of people who are not. I'm talking about racially diverse actors who are female-identifying, trans-identifying, genderfluid, and/or non-gender-conforming."[2] Setting casting as a

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[1] Lily Janiak, "No Men, Minimalist Boats in ACT's 'Men on Boats,' Written by Jaclyn Backhaus," Datebook, *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 24, 2018, https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/theater/no-men-minimalist-boats-in-acts-men-on-boats-written-by-jaclyn-backhaus.

[2] Jaclyn Backhaus, *Men on Boats*, production draft script, December 2016. A previous casting note in *Theatre Forum* stated: "The characters in Men on Boats are, historically, cisgender white males whose conquest of America is well-documented. The actors to be cast in Men on Boats are not to be cisgender white males. The cast is to be comprised of actors who are female-identifying, trans-identifying, genderfluid, and/or non-gender- conforming. The cast must be racially diverse. It is important to populate the world of the play with people who would not have originally been on these boats, people who are normally not given stories like this to tell." Jacklyn Backhaus, *Men on Boats*, in *Theatre Forum* 48, TF48 (2015): 79.

central conceit, the play draws parallels between history, gender, and theatricality and invite us to consider the ways they are approached and performed.

Since premiering in 2016, the play has been widely performed and is quickly becoming a college and university staple. One of the most obvious reasons for this is that *Men on Boats* fills a number of gaps in many university production seasons. The play not only provides weighty and leading roles for actors and performers who do not identify as men, but actively encourages the casting of women, nonbinary, trans, and genderfluid actors in its large ensemble. Backhaus notes that she would like it to be considered a feminist play and "per the casting note, it could take up a lot of different mantels as to who it is for and speaks to."[3] The play thus openly and directly calls attention to the ways we perform and stage gender.

Similarly, *Men on Boats* calls for a highly theatrical sense of staging. It is not possible to stage an historic river expedition, complete with waterfalls, rapids, and wild animals using techniques that resemble living room realism. The play presents a number of important challenges to designers and actors that open to potentially new ways of thinking through the way we approach casting, rehearsals, and staging history. As we discovered through rehearsals and production at the University at Buffalo's Department of Theatre and Dance, the play requires both a heightened theatricality and a deep earnestness. As a way of working through some of these theatrical opportunities we collaborated with dance dramaturg, Janet Werther, who was interviewed for this article.[4] This article examines some of those challenges of staging,

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[3] Summer Banks and Jaclyn Backhaus, "Questioning How We Tell Mainstream History with Men on Boats," *HowlRound*, October 8, 2016, https://howlround.com/questioning-how-we-tell-mainstream-history-men-boats.

[4] Werther suggested the format of an artist interview when we discussed the possibilities for writing about our experiences working on the production.

especially as they related to the highly gendered and theatrical performances demanded of performers.

As someone who might have been cast in an "historically accurate" version of the story, I was drawn to *Men on Boats* because of the seemingly difficult task of staging, critiquing, and questioning a piece of history that has been told and retold and elevated to almost mythic status. It is not possible to place dangerous rapids and waterfalls and twenty-foot boats in a black box theatre. Similarly, it is also not possible to fully represent historical events and, as the play is careful to foreground, our understanding of how gender is and might be staged is correspondingly unstable. Indeed, perhaps the most useful discovery of *Men on Boats* is the ways that the play leverages intensely theatrical moments to highlight, trouble, and play with the ways that gender is expressed and performed, reinforced and questioned, both in the theatre and in everyday life. Especially in rehearsing the intensely physical river scenes, we discovered and explored the gaps and frictions not only between the performers and their characters, but between the world of the play and our own.

The play is based loosely on Powell's notebooks (a Penguin Classic) from his various adventures and travels throughout the US southwest.[5] Over the course of twenty-two scenes and about ninety minutes, we are introduced to the team of ten explorers: John Wesley Powell, the one armed leader of the expedition; his brother and Civil War veteran, Old Shady; The chain smoking Howland brothers, OG and Seneca; the bros in the party boat, mapmaker Hall and Hawkins the cook; Frank Goodman, who is British and a bit tired of the whole adventure; a youthful Bradley; and two seasoned explorers and trappers, Dunn and Sumner, who don't always

[5] John Wesley Powell, *The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003).

get along but manage to keep the operation moving down river. There are seven major river set pieces, where the men on the boats navigate rapids, waterfalls, whirlpools, the dangers of falling overboard, and capsized boats.

The play pokes fun at and engages a poignant critique of the white supremacist project of manifest destiny and Powell and his crew's urge to claim and name every landmark they encounter as their own. As the *New York Times* notes: ""Men on Boats" starts from the realization that we can never recreate exactly how it was."[6] It also highlights the fact that those who were writing the history could never or simply didn't record it or perceive it exactly how it was. That is, and as we know, recorded history is malleable from the moment it is written. Will Davis, who directed the New York and then the Chicago productions, states: "One of the powerful threads in the performance of this piece is the way it commandeers someone else's legacy. With a beautiful twinkle in its eye, it's a revisionist history of someone else's revisionist history."[7]

Miriam Felton-Dansky in the *Village Voice* pointed out that "The distance between those macho white explorers and the racially diverse group of women playing them turns the performance into a study in learned male behaviors. It's hilarious, but also pointed, as Backhaus shows us the link between the pressures of white masculinity and the drive for territorial conquest."[8] It's worth marking Felton-Dansky's attention to the learned behavior of gender and

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[6] Ben Brantley, "Review: 'Men on Boats' Blurs Genders in Recalling John Wesley Powell's Expedition," *New York Times*, June 23, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/theater/review-men-on-boats-blurs-genders-in-recalling-john-wesley-powells-expedition.html.
[7] Deborah Stein, "What Kind of Explorer Are You? An Interview with Will Davis, Director of *Men on Boats*," *TheatreForum*, *Theatre Forum* 48, TF48 (2015), 76.
[8] Miriam Felton-Dansky, "'Men on Boats' Is Smooth Sailing," *The Village Voice*, August 2, 2016, https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/08/02/men-on-boats-is-smooth-sailing/.

its performance, especially onstage. In rehearsal for a play like *Men on Boats* the ways this behavior is learned and the work that must be taken to attend to it reminds us of the labor of gendering. This labor, of course, is everyday and is built into many theatrical characters in many other plays *Men on Boats*, however, highlights the effort of gender and the need to work through gendered movement and action.

One of the most theatrical problems in *Men on Boats* is the problem of performers deconstructing masculinity while simultaneously inhabiting masculine characters. The critique is embodied and performed, not separate from the object it unravels. In doing so, the play also reveals the very real and pernicious dangers of erasing femininity as well as the ease to which theatrical and representational art can simplify the fluidity of gender. It is a necessary reminder—that the casting note makes clear—that the play should be cast with anyone but cis, white men. The point is not that the play is cast with women, but with not-men. This should open many questions for any production teams and casts because it casts the actors negatively—defining a performer by what they are not, even as the character should be defined by who they are. We should welcome these questions and not just for this play. As M Sloth Levine importantly argues in *HowlRound*: "the burden should not be falling on Jaclyn Backhaus alone. *Men on Boats* is just one play. We should be considering her casting note in every pre-production meeting, in every casting call, and in every audition."[9] The questions raised by *Men on Boats* are questions of what is taken for granted and assumed in the processes of making theatre and there is a lot of work to do.

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[9] M Sloth Levine, "Men and Women and Non-Binary People on Boats: Exploring New Styles of Gender Diversity," *HowlRound*, September 26, 2018,https://howlround.com/men-and-women-and-non-binary-people-boats.

Gendering Movement

As a director, I was incredibly lucky to have the opportunity to work with dance dramaturg Janet Werther. Werther has an MFA in dance, is a University at Buffalo alum, and is currently a PhD candidate at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Werther is an active dancer, who works with contact improv as well as the dance group Ballez. Such experience and expertise became central to much of our work in the rehearsal studio. Both contact improv and Ballez stem from ethos of experimentation even as their work is distinct. Werther's experience with Ballez especially opened a number of possibilities in thinking through who gets to do what and with whom onstage, in both dance and theatre.

Ballez, according to their website, "is just what it sounds like... it's lesbians doing ballet. AND Ballez is not just lesbians, it's all the people whom ballet has left out."[10] The company was founded by Katy Pyle and offers classes in Brooklyn and online. They have produced original productions since 2013 and, as they write:

> Since 2011, we have invited the broader community into our work through open Ballez classes and workshops that share our vision of re-imagined ballet class culture; inviting dancers of all identities and backgrounds into our process to re-imagine all the standard components of a ballet class, but with joy, generosity, play, mutual admiration, and a reflection of our constantly evolving intersectional queer-feminist values. We re-introduce the desire, sexuality and provocation always inherent to ballet, but with the necessary addition of CONSENT, owning

[10] Ballez, "Mission," accessed July 1, 2019, http://www.ballez.org/mission/.

> our own beauty and sexuality, and defining and creating that for and with each other, with respect for one another and our boundaries.[11]

In rehearsals, Werther brought this ethos to our work, encouraging performers to consider gender and what it means to embody gender and to perform gender, both for oneself and in relation to others. Werther describes her work with Ballez, explaining that "Ballez is not a gender neutral practice at all. It's a highly-gendered practice. It's just a gendered practice that intentionally queers gender possibilities."[12] This manifested in rehearsals as performers worked through perceived boundaries of their own everyday and actorly gender performance and what it might mean to perform gender differently and while expanding their familiarity with gendered movement.

As Werther notes, stemming from Ballez practice, the work is in "queering gender possibilities." Werther continues:

> I mean queering in the verb sense, that you can be a heterosexual person doing Ballez, but the practice is going to ask you to look at a range of gender possibilities, and imagine yourself playfully into either a heightened sense of the gender roles that you feel accustomed to, or a completely other new playful set of possibilities that you might have never imagined for yourself."[13]

In many ways, without ballet movement, this describes much of what we did in rehearsals. It is work that I think the play demands of productions, both so the actors can develop their characters and their performances together and also so audiences are welcomed into the world of the play thoughtfully and with room to explore their own gendered experiences.

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[11] Ballez, "Mission." (Capitalization in original).
[12] Janet Werther, interview by Eero Laine via Skype, February 20, 2019.
[13] Werther, interview.

Questioning Gender and "Denaturalizing the Normal"

Indeed, we started the rehearsal process with discussions of gender and a sort of gender studies 101 that was part of our table read and that was meant to open some major questions for the work ahead. Questions from the cast and designers that day included: Do I present as a woman *playing* a man or am I just a dude? Are we trying to convince the audience that these are men onstage? Or are we rewriting history so these guys were women dressed as men? Such questions raised a number of discussions related to passing and what it meant to pass as a man or pass as a woman—was it possible? Were actors passing in the theatrical world of the play? Did they have to pass as men for the audience? Could performers use drag names in the program? What might it mean to approach the characters as men, knowing that "full masculinity" is impossible (for anyone)? How do we move off the binary spectrum of masc/fem? Is it possible for performers' femininity to show through in the characters' sometimes overwhelming- or hyper-masculinity? Could each cast member answer such questions differently or do we all have to agree? Will someone please tell me what gender I am? At one point prior to rehearsals someone from the costume studio just kept asking: "But are they men or are they women?" What about facial hair? *What about facial hair?* What. About. Facial. Hair? Even as I became hyper aware of my own beard, that costuming discussion crystalized many of the questions that cast and designers raised throughout the early parts of rehearsal and preproduction. Indeed, the issue of facial hair was a vitally important point with the cast and it opened a number of discussions related to body autonomy and gender presentation, not only related to costume design but to the ways that we might approach acting and performing onstage and in rehearsal. Some actors were viscerally opposed to putting on facial hair, while others were more open to it, while others still

decided to only consider it if it meant a more realistic representation of their historic characters—Method acting with moustaches.

In many ways the work we did only expanded these questions further rather than simply answering them. Designers and director could have just told everyone that they were performing men and resolved each question as simply as possible. But the performers were not men and indeed, at least one member of the cast did not use she/her pronouns. This was something we emphasized often as it was not uncommon for people both working on and outside of the production to describe the basic conceit as "women playing men" even though that was not the case for every performer. Something we came around to in rehearsals as Werther recalls, was the process of "denaturalizing your own normal." We discussed with the cast the friction between character and performers. Where did the performer's identity and movement and sense of being rub up against that of the character's? Where and when was such friction productive or even pleasurable? And how did that friction also cause discomfort? Of course, there wasn't always friction between university actors and 19th-century explorers, there were also considerable gaps. Rehearsals were leveraged to work through the frictions and the gaps, considering the overlap with and distance from the performers, not only in terms of gender but in terms of time and space. The gaps were thus as important as the frictions.

As a way of embodying and closely considering the gaps and frictions between character and performer, we did a lot of walking. Werther explains that walking was a way to find a common physical vocabulary—if everyone was trained in ballet or tap or another physical form with a movement vocabulary, we might have started there. Actors walked the length of the rehearsal room taking on various stylized or archetypically gendered roles: Minnie Mouse, John Wayne, project runway model giving shade to papparrazzi, a frat bro (overheard: "Oh man I just

got friendzoned and now I need a beer really hard.") Actors experimented with various registers of voice while singing and speaking. And later we started mixing these things up: a John Wayne swagger with a Minnie Mouse voice, crossing the bar to talk to a lady. Or a dude bro voice with a Disney evil queen walk. There was a moment the first time we did the evil queen walk, where half the cast clicked right into it. Their voices dropped a register or two and their focus was laser-like on their partner. Werther loved this moment and noticed it as an important discovery because it was a moment where some of the cast really realized what "already lives in their body" and how that manifests.[14] For Werther, this particular example was especially useful, she states: "to me there is an element of humor as a queer performance theorist, to see that evil queen, it's so easy to snap into because you know Ursula was based on Divine. 'Evil queen' is a drag performer."[15] Even as evil queen is very much in a drag tradition, it is also a sort of crystallization of a certain gendered performance that many recognize. It is very much a performance, and at times a rather obvious one at that, and yet it is also very much regularized and seems quite familiar in a number of contexts. This was an incredibly useful moment for the cast and the production team for the very reason that 'evil queen' was so obviously theatrical, and yet a good portion of the cast also found it quite natural. This tension and our discussion in rehearsal helped us push the conceit of gaps and frictions even further by naturalizing theatricality and theatricalizing what felt natural.

Playing such fictionalized versions of gendered embodiment helped performers recognize their own gendered performances. Werther explains the freedom in such expressions "both for

[14] Werther, interview.
[15] Werther, interview. Werther is a non-binary lesbian and uses both she/her and they/them pronouns. Werther stated that using "she" in the context of this article and our work together felt appropriate in contrast to my cis-male identity and the "maleness" of the play's characters.

people who have a very secure, and sort of ‘normal’ sense of their own gender and gender expression” and “also for people who feel genderqueer or gender non-normative in any way.”[16] It’s thus freeing in a way “to take on a character that has such clear gender expectations.”[17] Reinforcing clear gender expectations is also risky, and discussions of risk were fairly common in rehearsals in part because the play is highly physical in other ways.

Theatrical Risks

Our set designer for the production, graduate student Emily Powery, did a fantastic job of solving the problem of staging a river expedition by giving each of the cast members a rectangular stool that would be their seat in a boat and a dowel that stood in for an oar. The dowel was an inch in diameter and about four feet long. In rehearsal, we used the dowels to explore weight sharing and played tug of war on and off the stools. The gendered physicality of the actors was provided an abstract and imaginary landscape to manifest and develop. Performers were not paddling realistic boats and thus had opportunity to work through their theatrically male characters.

Concerns about what to do if a stool tipped or if a dowel was dropped turned into exercises in kicking over stools and throwing dowels down. Such work led to exercises that involved swinging partners and catching people as they leapt and dragging and pulling each other around the rehearsal space by ropes. The dowels were used for exercises that encouraged actors to oscillate between leading and guiding the partnered movement to following and pliably reacting to one’s partner. These exercises built upon to develop the various daring rescue scenes

[16] Werther, interview.
[17] Werther, interview.

in the play. There was a cat and mouse weight sharing exercise where one participant created a structure for the other to pounce onto—how can you perch on top of your partner in a way that is "rugged" we asked? What does that mean to be rugged or an explorer, regardless of the gender of the character or other expectations? What happens when you attempt ruggedness in character? Or as yourself? How are they different and how are they the same? How does an explorer walk? By this point in the rehearsal process, nobody asked if that explorer was a man or a woman. Performers had a movement vocabulary that allowed them to try on and cycle through various ways of performing themselves and their character as well as gendered movement that sat on spectrums from goofy to serious and natural to theatrical.

In general and throughout the workshops, Werther and I noted the ways that there was often initial concern over falling or touching that might be perceived as rough. However, as we continued, a familiarity formed, a sort of toughness in the ways that the performers handled each other. It was certainly a caring kind of toughness, but it was not delicate or precious as performers pulled and threw each other around the room, rescuing each other from imaginary rapids and leaping into each other's arms in celebration. From my vantage, it was quite interesting to see performers manipulate each other in ways that were playful and even sportive—a sort of easy competitiveness worked its way into some of the exercises. The work became less timid and performers engaged each other in new ways, sometimes jokingly and playfully taking on and responding through various gendered movements and voices. This is the vital contribution of Janet Werther's dance dramaturgy. Actors had a vocabulary, not of dance (pirouettes, etc.) but a range of gendered embodiment and of both dominating and ceding space that they had divorced from some of their previous notions of such behavior. That is, the exercises and the work that we developed through many of physically intense river scenes

informed the rest of the play. For instance, when two of the characters get into a major fight around the campfire, actors played with controlling the action and distance between each other as they switched from ‘Clint Eastwood stare down’ to ‘diva shade’ to ‘come at me bro.’ And they did so from their own perspective and on their own terms, not aping previous characters and performances, but finding different ways of taking on and performing gender as both performer and character. During the run of the play, their actions might have read as those of 19th-century male explorers, but only because they performed and even pushed up against a way of being in the world that is so often so familiar.

Conclusion

The final scene of the play is somewhat unique among the others in that it features a sequence that is written as a series of exclamations that are spoken and shouted in sequence and in unison as the characters navigate a particularly difficult part of the river. The members of the expedition that remain at that point in the play work and speak together, guided by chunks of dialogue like: “LEFT / LEFT / RIGHT / LEFT” and “Left Steady Steady Left Left Left Left Watch Out / WATCH OUT / WATCH THE WALL / WATCH THE / wall / wait / the wall / wait. the wall. / the wall. is.” This scene is notable because the script is so precise and even proscriptive as the language guides the action. Our approach to this scene thus stood in contrast in many ways to other scenes in the play in that it was fairly tightly choregraphed. Through some of the physical vocabulary developed throughout the rehearsal process, Werther choreographed movement to match the chantlike chorus of directives. This was a little strategic on my part as the director. Our actors at the University at Buffalo receive a high level of Method actor training, and I wanted to offer them something that was very physical that they could focus on as

movement. As a director, I wanted the final scene to be highly presentational and in unison and tightly choreographed—a performed display of technical proficiency on the part of the performers and the characters they portrayed, who were at this is point in their journey a tight-knit group of travelworn, highly skilled adventurers.

I mention this here lastly because it is quite different from our approach to performing gender and even many of the other scenes on the river. While we could have likely given the cast bits of choregraphed "masculine" actions throughout the play, we rather built a vocabulary of gender that allowed performers room to explore the gaps and frictions between themselves as performers and the characters—fluidly and with relative autonomy. In the end, none of the cast decided to apply facial hair, and I think that is because we worked through the wider possibilities of gendered performance. We didn't need the apparently simple signifier of a beard or moustache, in much the same way that we didn't need to flood the stage and build historically accurate boats. We embraced the many ways that the play revels in questioning social and theatrical conventions and productions. As we learned through our production, it is important for directors, actors, and designers to take time to explore those ideas of gender and history together in rehearsals and in open conversations throughout the rehearsal process. These challenges and questions are precisely what make *Men on Boats* such an appealing choice for a university theatre season. Developed this way, *Men on Boats* pushes us to think about how history is told and retold and how theatre can help us see old stories in a new light. And it should force us to consider the ways that gender is considered in every play produced. *Men on Boats* asks us to take in the many ways that historic events can be embodied and performed and to consider carefully who gets to tell such tales and how performers can move through differences and denaturalize the natural in themselves and, indeed, in history.

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