



Rehearsing *Men on Boats*: A Dialogue

Eero Laine and Janet Werther

Eero Laine: Thank you for taking the time to talk about our work together on *Men on Boats* at the University at Buffalo. It was my first time working with a dance dramaturg on a university production, and looking back, I am not sure how this play would have come together without your contributions and presence in the process. You were in residence for a full week early in rehearsals and then for a long weekend as we were headed towards tech week. I hope we can discuss our process and also some of the theoretical and practical considerations that informed our work together. I am quite interested in your thoughts now—some time after the fact—and also in discussing ideas about the future of the play and how it might develop.

So, to start, I guess I wanted to ask what you want to discuss. Are there any questions or issues that you would want to take up?

Janet Wether: I think the thing I've been thinking about, in terms of *Men on Boats*, is the matter of improvisation versus scripted movement.¹ In rehearsal, we did so many improvisational activities, which I think were really useful. And yet, when it came

¹ In her book *Racial Innocence*, Robin Bernstein uses the term “scriptive objects,” which refers to objects that, through their histories of social use, suggest a set of common behaviors, or scripts. Bernstein notes that Susan Leigh Foster prefers the term choreography, as her perception of a script is of something closed, whereas Foster’s perception of choreography is one that is open to the nuances of the moment of performance. I was thinking of Bernstein’s use of “script” here, and I would suggest that notions of choreography are often less indeterminate than notions of script. Much dance training passes on choreography as an exactitude, expecting performers to emulate those dancers who have come before them. In dance, a structured improvisation—which would script movement without precisely choreographing it—is often referred to as a “score.” But a score is rather more indeterminate than a script. I’m using “scripted” here to connote a kind of movement that is planned, not indeterminate, but more open colloquial notions of “choreography” allow. See Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

to some of the boat scenes or anything that was really action-based, in order to maintain the modes of embodiment that we were discovering through improv, we seemed to really need to set choreography or scripted movement. That surprised me. I wonder, just for myself, if that's a question of training practices (for instance dance vs. theatre), and how, if at all, gendered notions of movement affected that sense of wanting choreography.

Eero: That's great. Let's just start there, because I think that's getting right into some of the central questions of the play. That is, I think you're getting into the heart of the matter in terms of choreography versus an embodied way of moving. I don't know if it's a strict continuum because there were those moments that were highly choreographed (the final rapids scene for instance), and then we also wanted the cast to have a sense of freedom in exploring the physicality of these characters that they were really, for the most part, quite unlike.

I mean in some of the exercises you brought to rehearsals, the cast was able to take up a sense of embodied masculinity, but also a sort of nineteenth century masculinity, if we can call it that. Both of those, of course, are in various ways framed for a contemporary audience by the play. There's a point where the embodied sense of gender or gender performance starts to move into gender choreography. So, we're not just talking about choreography in terms of when the boats move or tip over or when everyone falls down in unison or whatever, but there is also a choreographic practice to performing gender. You mentioned your work with Ballez, how do you think that practice informed your work on *Men on Boats*? There was also quite a bit of content improv that went into some of the rehearsals as well, yes?

Janet: I've practiced ballet my whole life, pretty much since I could walk, but I've practiced contact improv longer than I have practiced Ballez.² Contact improv is

² For my perspective on the difference between ballet and Ballez, which is explicitly tied to explorations of virtuosity and shame, see my article "Ballez Talks Back" in *PAJ*. Janet Werther, "Ballez Talks Back," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* vol. 39 no. 1 (2017): 53-57.

also a really familiar home space for me movement-wise. One of the things I liked about—I mean I still enjoy this about it—but when I first started contact, it was one of the first movement practices that I had done that felt like I could be powerful, and also that the movement did not have gendered expectations for me. I feel really comfortable as a base in contact—in other words, lifting or being a support for the body weight of other people. That is different than when you're doing something like tap dance, and there are not a lot of boys, and you're taller, and you feel comfortable as the biggest, so you end up putting on the vest and the top hat, and you are the boy character.

I'm not particularly tall, but I grew to my full height young. That practice of putting on a “boy role” in the absence of boy dancers is a dance school thing that I was familiar with, and it was in contact improv where I could be the base in a really powerful and empowered way that felt androgynous, but didn't feel like it was putting on a new set of gendered expectations. That really drew me to it. I think in some ways Ballez is the opposite of that because contact improv is...and other people have also talked about this...Steve Paxton started the contact work he was doing with a group of all men, but very quickly there were women who got involved, and have been the major teachers and progenitors of the form, Lisa Nelson and Nancy Stark Smith. These women have talked about it, and are quoted on video even as saying that they felt a certain androgyny was possible in contact improv, and that they could take on strength roles that otherwise in dance they were not given access to.

That is to say, 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. I say that even ... I mean that 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.

In a Ballez class, when you're doing a Ballez *piece* you may have one role throughout the piece, but in a Ballez class you might do pliés one time like the fairy princess, and how could you do your port de bras as the fairy princess, and then you'll turn to the other side, and be like, "Okay," and now you are the chevalier, and how can you do your plié as the chevalier? In the practice of Ballez there is that question of, "How many new possibilities can we distinguish, and can we play with all of those roles?"

The other thing that I think both practices have—contact improv and Ballez—but in very different ways is a real privileging of risks. In contact improv it's a physical risk, it's a risk of weight sharing, how much ... I mean, actually in both ways there's a vulnerability that's at play, because to do an improvisation: "We didn't plan this lift, but we're going to just see where momentum can take us, and if we can share our weight in this way, and maybe we will tumble to the ground, and maybe that will look embarrassing, but we are going to do it safely because we're trained to do this safely, and we're going to let ourselves tumble if we have to tumble." That's a really vulnerable moment.

I think, actually when I wrote about Ballez for *Performing Arts Journal* this is what I wrote about.³ There's a moment in the movie *Center Stage* where this one dancer keeps doing a triple turn, and the teacher yells at her, and is like, "I want a clean double," and she's like, "But there's room for three, and wouldn't it be better if we all did a triple?" That maybe in ballet, the teacher would say, "No you can't, I want everyone to do a clean double." In Ballez it's more like, "If you can do a triple you need to try four." You need to push yourself until you are falling. You need to push yourself to the edge of what feels uncomfortable to show other people, whether that's in the physicality, the technical capacity or whether that's in the gender expression. There is this idea that if you're not butting up against potential shame ... it's not Ballez. *That* vulnerability, and *that* risk is part of what I think that form is.

For me, bringing both of those, and we never really talked about shame in the rehearsal room, or vulnerability, but bringing those two practices was a way of

³ Werther, "Ballez Talks Back," 2017.

trying to get at the idea that *doing* gendered movement, especially when such movement is not aligned with how you personally identify or present yourself on a daily basis. That is a vulnerable moment, and it is a moment where there is the possibility of shame. That's what we're going for, which I would say is actually not that distanced from the white male experience of the characters in *Men on Boats*. Toxic masculinity is the other side of the fear of shame, but I think about a moment in rehearsal, asking a performer: "Could you land that assemblé with wide legs scooping up fish instead of landing it in fifth position?"

For an acting student, who identifies as a dancer but maybe isn't a dance major, letting go of that idea of perfection is a vulnerable moment, and yet it's also a moment where it enables you to bring a character forward, and it enables you to bring in gender expression, if you can get familiar with it, and then be willing to live in that moment of potential shame.

Eero: A lot of that resonates, I mean, especially the sense of danger. I remember talking to you about the danger that some of the performers felt. I mean, it's not like they were in danger, but there were questions about, "Well, what if the stool tips over?"

Janet: Yes, right.

Eero: Your response was: "You're not on it. It's fine. Kick it over every once in a while." Right?

Janet: Right, and this I think also gets back to the question of improvisation versus scripted movement possibilities, like there are moments where you don't want the stool to tip over, right? Because you're trying to create a picture onstage, and you want the picture. There are a lot of times in which that picture would be kind of great if something specific happened, but you can't guarantee it's going to happen every time. You actually don't want it to be so planned that it's happening every

time. I think this is also part of why being on stage in front of people is an essential part of performance training, it can't all be in a classroom setting.

Because part of figuring one's self out as a mature performer has to be about, "Yeah, what happens when it tips?" You didn't expect it, and instead of jumping out of character, and having a "Huh," pause out of character moment, and then picking up and moving on, that you find a way not to ignore that something happened or pretend that it didn't happen or whatever. But to include that as part of the action that just happened on stage that you now, in character, are going to deal with, which even in a very highly scripted performance is a moment of improvisation.

I think sometimes back to my first dance recital. I was like three, and the teacher was saying to us, "What happens if something goes wrong on stage? What happens if your tap shoes falls off? Keep dancing! What happens if your hat falls off? Keep dancing!" We're like three, and we're finding this hilarious, and it starts with things falling off. Eventually we're like, "And if your skirt falls off? And if your costume falls off, if you're naked on stage. Keep dancing!" It's like you don't necessarily want to be in this situation where this is happening on stage, but you Just. Keep. Dancing. But you also do not want to be that person who's like, "Oh no, my hat fell off. I have to pick it up right now because it has to be on my head," and that was one of most important things for this play.

I'm not sure how well if that exactly communicates what I mean here ... I think there's obviously a difference between "just keep going" and "stay in character." The really skilled performer finds a way not to ignore what is going on that is unexpected or unplanned for, but also not to "drop" character and "fix" it, either. Rather that performer responds with some sort of authenticity to the character they've developed, reacting and responding in real time without breaking role.

One thing I really loved about the process was that risk was happening. It's so interesting that we talked about it more with things like the stools than anything else, which were so divorced from the content of the play and its dramaturgy. I love that. It was a question that was in the room, both in a very

practical way (can we be riskier without injuring ourselves with a stool?) and also in a way that dealt with character, and with the question of being an explorer.

Eero: It is also connected to what you referred to as gendered expectations. Also, I think there is something in the risk of taking on or breaking gendered expectations, both as performers, but also as characters, and of navigating those expectations regularly. I think that's where some of the choreography was really interesting because the choreography, gave performers something to do—they were able to focus less on a theatrical, masculine framework, letting some of the choreography do some of that work for them. Do you agree with that?

Janet: Yeah, I think that especially when the boat choreography got intense it was maybe the opposite of what you would expect. For instance, before the choreography was clarified it was hard to maintain character, with gender being part of that character. But when we could focus on doing the choreography with precision it actually enabled a certain freedom around that embodiment.

For instance, some performers developed a real bro-y bond between their characters, beyond what I had necessarily read into the script, but they found that together, and I loved that. It was so great. I mean, it's an interpretation of what we think these guys could have been like. But I found it really satisfying to see that bro-iness develop through some of the work that we did of finding masculinity in the masculine tropes that we have as twenty-first century college folks. Then having it put to use in the boat, even when the choreography was secure, we could ask: "What am I doing? When? What is the rhythm?" Then that persona was able to breathe.

Eero: We did a lot of workshops on walking. Could you talk about that? I think there is a connection to bros there.

Janet: I think it's possible that if everybody in the room had had a different shared movement training in common, that I might have gone with something other than

walking. I do feel like in Ballet we get at some of those same sort of invisibilized gender movement patterns through Ballet or ballet vocabulary. In Ballet class or rehearsal, ballet vocabularies are shared vocabularies. I hold my arm this way or this way, if I flip my wrist in a certain way it has certain gender connotations, and we know the shapes so we can play with them in particular ways. I don't know actually if I would have not done walking. I think that it's ... obviously I don't want to say universal because not every person walks ... but in a room full of people who walk, and who don't use chairs or crutches for mobility, it's maybe the most universal behavior, physical behavior.

People sit in all kinds of different ways culturally. People eat in all kinds of different ways culturally, but we perambulate, and it's behavior that we don't think about when we're doing it. We just do it, and yet studies have actually shown that you can tell who somebody is more quickly from further away by their walk than by ... like before you can see their face and tell who they are by face or before you can tell who they are by voice ... you can tell who they are just by how they walk.

It's simultaneously something that we don't think about at all, and something that is very, very particular to each one of us that makes us recognizable as a unique individual, and that has a lot of social construction, that when a butch woman says that she was made fun of while walking in a dress as a girl, it's because she walked with her legs farther apart than we expect someone to walk who is wearing a dress. I got made fun of a lot running as a kid, and I was a very fast runner, but I got made fun of for my run because my arms were flipping in a way that people thought was very effeminate.

Even though I was a girl and feminine behavior was normal to me there was an extremity of the femininity that I was apparently performing that people found funny, and it was described in derogatory ways. When on a sports team, boys will be told not to run "like a girl." If somebody's hips are swishing in a particular way, that's where the word swishy for someone gay comes from, it's the idea that his hips swished when he walks. There is so much queer history around walking, especially through vogue, not that we did any vogue exercises, but that

drag balls, as George Chauncey points out, long predate *Paris is Burning*, that at the turn of the twentieth century drag balls were happening in Harlem, with the parade of people in drag and dresses.⁴ Another example: whether or not you can walk in heels says something about you as a person, as a gendered being.

When I think kinesthetically through Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, it's one of the easiest examples to sort of isolate movement patterns.⁵ Most people walk on a daily basis. We don't think about it, but it is a copy of other people walking, but it's always a copy no matter who you are, no matter how well you're upholding the gender role that you've been sifted into. It is a copy with a difference, and we can't go back to any original. When you really do try and copy ... for instance, the very first performance of *La Cage* on Broadway they did not do the John Wayne walk. Nathan Lane did it in the movie *The Birdcage*, and then in every revival of *La Cage* the "Nathan Lane Walk" or the "John Wayne Walk" has been in there.

But it's such a great moment where you see, if you actually get very close to the thing itself, that your copying becomes parody. Walks are so specific. I think it was a really useful tool to be able to play with what we *think* we know about gendered behavior, and to let that parody be in the room, and to sort of break down tension around taking on these roles. But then you do start to realize that there are expectations about men or that they take up more space when they move, and when they sit. This is where "manspreading" comes from, and everything else, but we could have done, we could have sat on stools and manspreaded, but then we wouldn't have been in motion, and as a character you have to be able to be in motion, so we walked.

My goal was to get at extremes of both feminine and masculine ways of walking, so that we could denaturalize both what seems normal for us in the room, and also what we're putting ourselves into that seems "other." I wanted to get away from a sense of the personal, the "normal," the "I just walk how I walk,"

⁴ See: George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

⁵ See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, [1990] 2006).

and start to think about roles in a really capacious sense: social roles. Then we eventually took that into saying lines, repeated lines, and starting to bring that into a walking in character, and I think that was a really useful moment to start thinking like: "Okay, now I'm not doing frat bro, like a generic version of taking up space, but now I'm going to do it, I'm going to imagine, I'm going to use words that this person says, and then link that capacity for movement, and make it a *particular* guy who walks to take up space."

Eero: I appreciate the way we worked with extremes, in particular with the walking exercises, because you came for different length workshops. It was quite interesting to see the difference from the first time you came to the second, when the actors were sort of living with their characters a little bit. I'm thinking of this because we had some people who were observing rehearsals as part of a dramaturgy class, and one of them told me later that they were amazed at how some of these walking exercises worked. One of the dramaturgy observers overheard at least one of the actors saying, "Oh, I already do that," during some of these walks. But then also they were very interested to see that moment where actors tried out their "Evil Queen" walk and really half of the room just snapped into it. And then watching them attempting another extreme of, say, a John Wayne walk, and some were odd and clumsy about it. I think that was really useful for performers to see and feel what already lives in them and what felt out of place.

Janet: Yes, exactly. And then to me there is an element of humor as a queer performance theorist, to see that evil queen moment. It's so easy to snap into because it's so familiar as hyper-feminine behavior, but you know Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* was based on Divine, the drag queen from John Waters's movies. Evil queen is a drag performer. And so I think, and I mean there are lots of... you know like Lois Weaver will say that her Tammy Why Not is a drag character. Even her character in *A Streetcar Named Desire* when she's playing Stella, she is

listed in the text as “a woman disguised as a woman.”⁶ I think it's really freeing, both for people who have a very secure, and sort of "normal" sense of their own gender and gender expression, but I think also for people who feel genderqueer or gender non-normative in any way, to take on a character that has such clear gender expectations.

I think it's important to denaturalize your own “normal,” as well as taking on the new kinds of behaviors that you're going to take on, because we don't think about the fact that folks who were assigned female, are trained to be like “evil queen” or “princess.” We're putting on one of those characters so many times, from the time we're so young, that it *feels* natural. But something feeling natural is still socially constructed. It felt really important to go to the feminine extreme in that activity as well, so that folks could also feel what either didn't feel normal to them on a feminine extreme, even though they feel normal as women, or to feel, "Oh, this feels soooo normal." But this too is something we can deconstruct, that we can play with, and that is learned behavior.

We then did, once we had gotten really more comfortable with those extremes, we did start to denaturalize them in part by giving instructions for what that character is *doing* that felt like it might be incongruous. I don't quite recall exactly what those kinds of pairings were, but “John Wayne afraid of a spider” I think was one. The character then having to be still that person, *that* character, but take on a behavior that we would feel was incongruous with their gender presentation.

Eero: I think another one was Minnie Mouse going to pick a fight or pick up the lady across the room. It's quite interesting, I think, in terms of *Men on Boats*, because the play has these characters that are set, there's a script in a way that in drag performance there isn't necessarily. We talked about this with the performers quite a bit, but where do you see *Men on Boats* sitting in relation to drag performance?

⁶ The script for *Belle Reprise* can be found in Sue-Ellen Case, ed., *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 149-184.

Janet: Right, I think there are two conversations to have about that, and one is about casting practice, and the other is about the dramaturgy of the play that I think sits independent of casting choice. I think we often think of drag—unless we're thinking of something historical, like in Shakespeare there were no women on stage, and therefore men played women's roles—we think of drag as a comedic practice, and it's not to say that there's not comedy in *Men on Boats*, but it's also a very earnest play. I think that the earnestness maybe makes it hard to see it as drag because you don't anticipate that kind of earnestness with drag, but I also think that it is participating in a feminist theatre discourse about what drag is or isn't, and whether or not drag can or can't be feminist which ... I often teach Kate Davy's 1994 article from the edited volume *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, edited by Moe Myers.⁷

Kate Davy basically says that Camp is, it's 1993, I don't know what she would say today, but she basically says that, Camp is female impersonation, and that it is inherently misogynist because it points out femininity as constructed behavior, and it is tied up with shame, but that when men perform femininity as shame it inherently shames womanhood, and keeps womanhood in a subservient position, and that the men who performed drag can leave those personas behind, and move as men in the world, and women don't have that freedom. Furthermore, as I read Davy's argument from 1993, when women do male impersonation it doesn't work the same way, because women cannot knock men down a peg the way that men can knock women down a peg. That women do not have the social capital basically or the cultural capital to be able to put men in their place through drag. What male impersonation can do is to try to give women some sort of accolade for approximating normative manhood and masculinity, but by giving women accolades for approximating normative manhood and masculinity you are just upholding patriarchal supremacy.

⁷ Kate Davy, "Fe/Male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp" in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyers (New York: Routledge, 1994), 111-127.

I understand the logic of that argument. I also think it's worn out. I mean I know that Jack Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* talks about drag king, early drag king competitions just being about realness, like who is the person most able to be mistaken for a real man.⁸ I don't know that that's true. I've never *seen* a drag king performance that was doing that. They've always been parodic in my experience. But I also think about, like, Peggy Shaw in *Belle Reprieve* doing the M-A-N dance with the gay male performers who are very swishy, and she is the tallest, strongest, most masculine of the men on stage, and she is doing nothing to make you think that she doesn't have breasts. I think that it *does* denaturalize masculinity, and I think it *does* take masculinity down a peg, and it *is* parodic.

I think that's what's interesting about *Men on Boats*, that it also... I don't know if I even want to say critiques... but it questions the terms of masculinity, masculine behavior, masculine prerogative, the very things that make masculinity toxic: ownership, and that sense of prerogative to name and claim space, land, people, whatever. Even though they're going to starve, they can't survive on their own, but this is *their* journey, not indigenous space. It does skewer the toxic elements of what we understand as masculinity, but in such a more earnest way, and in way that also shows intimacy amongst men, and between men, and not just intimacy through violence or romance. That shows deep inner lives, that these men are struggling to express to one another, and that works between the differences of a power struggle and what is just a disagreement about what's best to take care of one another.

I find it fascinating in the way that it's using drag. I know other people have produced the play with casts that are gender diverse, and there was some gender diversity in our cast I should say, but I do think that being able to see these characters, these performers as in drag in one way or another is an important part of the work that it's doing. It's simultaneously denaturalizes the power dynamics, and the prerogatives of masculinity, and also denaturalizes intimacy and caregiving as feminine behaviors.

⁸ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.

Eero: I think it's interesting because you could ask the question of the play, and of the playwright, "Why not just write a play without male characters?" I mean coming from the premise that basically Backhaus was sort of in love with this historic story, and then wrote the play because she realized that she would never get to play any of these characters. On the one hand, I think that's a real question: "Well, why not just write a gender diverse adventure play?" But there's something more there in casting "not-men" to play men.

Janet: Yeah, and I think that especially we're talking about the American Frontier, and because I think that although it is less explicit than her critique of masculinity, I think there's also a critique of white supremacy, and the American Manifest Destiny Project in this play, and so you would lose that. I also think that the questions of gendered behavior are just different. Even if you have women going to colonize Mars, the question of a woman taking on power or how a woman can take on power that is normally—has historically been—reserved for men, is valuable. It becomes about, "Can women take on power without losing the positive ways in which they've been socialized feminine?" Which I think is really different from what Backhaus is doing.

I think even the ways in which she shows caregiving and intimacy are not particularly queer. They're friendship-based or brotherly. They're about the survival of the group, and they don't throw into question the masculinity or maleness of these characters. The United States has a lot of white men who want to assert their individuality, and their right to ownership, and power, etc. The funny thing that happens in the course of this play when it's done well, when the embodiment is working, is that you start to see the character just as a character.

Yes, there are moments where you are seeing that the drag is showing, you the gap between character and actor, but there are also moments when it's not, and those are often the most intimate caring moments, in which you're not denaturalizing this man as a man. You're seeing him as the adventurous man, but the man who also cares to share one apple with everybody because everybody

else is starving. We've got to eat, we don't want to get scurvy or whatever. I think that shows us a kind of possibility from masculinity that we don't often get to see.

Eero: That earnestness functions as a really powerful critique. We sometimes put critique next to cynicism, or even cold analysis, but it's really the earnestness of the play, and of these performers coming out to perform these things that they may or may not be like in these situations.

Janet: But then it's like... that's where the embodiment has to be so secure, and so ingrained in your presentation of that character. I mean it's not Stanislavskian either, but that character has to have such a truth of their own movement, that if you slip up in one of those moments it ruins the effect. Those are the moments, where you can slip up a little bit in a humorous moment and show that gap between yourself as a woman playing this character and the character as a male character. But in those moments of earnestness and intimacy you have to just be able to maintain that character's movement habits that you've established, so that the audience can see him, the character, in those moments.

Eero: You can almost imagine a lesser play that plays on that gap for humor on a regular basis, as the primary source of comedy. And maybe we can segue a little bit because you were listed in the program as a dance dramaturg, right?

Janet: Yeah.

Eero: As opposed to, say, movement specialist, gender consultant, all of these other things that we might have had, so what is about the title of dance dramaturg that applies here in light of drag and humor in *Men on Boats*?

Janet: I will say dramaturg is a word that has been part of my entire professional life, but used very differently in theatre and dance. I guess I am interested as a practitioner in what it means for those roles to be able to converge a little bit, and to converge

both in movement and in research. In dance practice, a dramaturg is often used in a way that we might understand the director, that if someone has a solo show or a devised theatre piece, that *they* are the generative artist for, and *they're* going to perform in it, but they want someone else on the outside as a “director” shaping it.

That's not to say that a dramaturg is sitting in the room with the dance rehearsal being very directorial. But I sometimes think choreographers use the word dramaturg as this external eye, this person watching, and telling you what it looks like, in a way that is more similar than not to a director. But by using the word “dramaturg” there is no ceding of authorial voice, versus the idea of the dramaturg in theatre as someone who does research and brings historical information—maybe archival images or things—which is a whole other thing from the dramaturg as literary manager. For me “dance dramaturg” was a useful moniker for the work that I was doing, not because I was doing archival work or looking at images from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries to find out what clothes men wore or what they stood like in pictures. I wasn't reading diaries to see if they spoke about movement capacities or whatever. I wasn't talking to reenactors who do historical reenactment, but it was about bringing a body of research around gendered movement, and the history of gendered movement and drag in the theatre.

I feel like that research capacity or that embodied archive is part of why the word dramaturg is important to me, because I do think that I am invested in the idea of a dramaturg as some kind of researcher archivist, whether the archive sits in a library or is a history of practice. But then I think it was important that it was “dance dramaturg” or “movement dramaturg,” because specifically the work I was dramaturging was around movement, and gendered movement in the theatre, not around people. I also didn't do that specific kind of traditional academic research for this project; it was practice-based research, which does dovetail with some of my “traditional” research ... but I didn't make a standard “dramaturgy packet.” I was primarily invested in movement itself over specific histories. I wasn't looking at people from this period of time and asking "Was

there anyone who went on a government expedition who was a woman passing as a man?" That was irrelevant to the work that I was bringing to the project.

Part of wanting to be called a dance dramaturg was about, or a movement dramaturg would have also been fine, was about wanting a sort of activist's take in what this role can be, what it can mean to be doing this kind of work, which I think is still an emerging field in some ways. Then part of it is just how I understand what the labor I was being asked for is, and what are the words that make sense to me.

Eero: Some might argue that every production should have a dramaturg. Do you think every play should have a dance dramaturg? Or where does dance dramaturgy sit with the theatre?

Janet: I wish a lot more plays that use dance had movement dramaturgs. Especially in musical theatre. And I get it. There are far fewer people who are musical theatre aficionados, who are highly trained in dance, as compared to those who are highly trained in music. I think actors often have great instincts about this. But I do think that having a person in the room who can speak to movement practices would be really nice, especially with young actors or student actors, especially when there's some sense of wanting to have a relationship to history, especially also in situations where a director may be making choices as an outside eye and telling actors to do very specific things that might not fit with history or whatever.

Eero: A lot of that happens with casting, where some are cast because they walked into the room and they looked the part or moved the part already or whatever it is. But that's something that *Men on Boats* sort of explodes. And that's perhaps why it's so popular. It's been performed on so many college campuses.

Janet: I think that dance training is great training, but there's a lot of movement that happens on stage that's not dance. I'm thinking about one college I taught at where they have daily dance class for the BFA students. That's great, but what is their

training in terms of embodying a character when they're asked to do daily dance? It makes more sense to me that students would be bringing scenes and characters into a movement class, which I think is really valuable and important training. But I think we depend on people to have instinct about that, and we laud it when people do, but we don't actually have really strong training practices in this country right now about how to build characterization through movements. We still divide dance and lines (i.e. the text and acting of a production). I would love to see that training developed, and I think that something like *Men on Boats* is a show that necessitates that. You can't just separate out boat scenes, movements, and learning lines.

Eero: That's actually quite nice because we're going back to where we started. I just have a couple more questions for you, the idea of the choreography and/or embodiment and how these things are intermixed. I guess, one of the last couple of questions I have is if you were walking into the rehearsal room for *Men on Boats* as a dance or movement choreographer or dramaturg today, how would you approach that work?

Janet: I do think I would still want to start from a sense of play, and getting into the body, and denaturalization. I think I would really love actually to bring in more history.

Eero: Interesting.

Janet: I would love to actually talk more about risks and shame and drag. I think from that perspective it could be useful actually to even do more historical research from the particular period and to look at that in comparison to the legacies of gender cross-performance on stage. I think everything I'm saying is basically additive, I'm not sure that there is something I would do differently than from what we did, but I think I would also love to spend more time with students individually. Working with actors individually, working on their particular

character, and any sort of movement particularities or quirks of their character. Because I think that is something that *Men on Boats* really does well—and I think the kind of dance that I'm excited by does well also—the idea that an ensemble is different from a kickline, for instance. That you can have people doing the same thing at the same time without losing individuality.

I think, in fact, that's something that is part of the critique, like these characters are individuals, and they have the prerogative of individuality in history, but they're also a community. We so often set those binaries as well, that you could be collective or you can be an individual. Why not both? In movement practice, unison has been compared to fascism, and I think for a good cause sometimes. The idea that people with different bodies are all going to kick exactly the same height, at exactly the same time, and you could sub this person out and put a totally different person in, and nobody would notice, there is a certain kind of fascism to that in a low key way.

I think you can do the same thing at the same time, you can be in unison, you can be an ensemble without losing individuality. I think it's really fascinating to think about doing that through a body that you've constructed for a particular character. Then it becomes a theoretical possibility or a utopian possibility. I would love to think and talk about that openly, and really work on the nitty gritty of the individual characters, who they are and what they move like, and how their movement and speech interacts. Are there different phases of themselves through movement? Do they move differently in front of certain people or in certain context than they do in other more private moments? Then work as well from that place on building that sense of ensemble motion from these very particularized character places.

Eero: You're almost answering this next question, which my last question, but what do you think theatre, and I do mean this very broadly, might learn from a play like *Men on Boats*?

Janet:

I think that part of what's really interesting about this play to me is that it has the same goal on many different levels, and different modalities within it as well. It talks about risks and it talks about taking up space. Then it's also asking actors who are not assigned male at birth to find risk and find taking up space in their bodies. Then it also asks you through the design to think about how you can foreclose or open up space in a space that does not change. It's working it at all of these different levels, and simultaneously, it is not devised. It's a script that exists, that you are staging. Yet it requires devised practices, which I think is part of that same overall dramaturgy of the work, the work that it's doing in the world, and in the theatre. That was really something that with young actors who have been trained in particular techniques, Stanislavski and Meisner, to work through devising, and to watch you work with them at devising was really exciting because it didn't seem familiar for every young actor in that room, but it felt like they were able to really go there. *Men on Boats* (again, especially with a group of young women and folks assigned female at birth) does what devising should do, which is create a space for the actor to have agency. I think in a sort of very Butlerian way, this play tells us that practice creates realities, and also what we attend to, what we notice. This is very much a play about what is remembered. People existed, they're remembered in a particular way. What are we going to attend to in the historical fiction? Are we going to remember them as the people who named the Grand Canyon? Are we going to remember them as people who almost starved?

I think the doing of this play is what gets at its broader messaging, and that creates possibility, if not always in the broader world that we could say to people like, "Hey, you know democratic socialism is like we can be collective and individual at the same time." But at least in the context of the theatre I think it asks us to have practice, create traditions, and create realities. It asks us to have a play that says: "We would love to see more roles for women. Let's cast women in some roles. We would love young actors to feel more empowered in taking on their characters." Well, there are parts of this play that you have to do through

devising practices because I'm not going to tell you what to do with the boat scenes. You have to figure it out. I guess that I think is the take away for me.

Eero: It's a play about men on boats, but there are no men, and there are no boats. I really like the ways this reminds us that the theatre as a place of practice and repetition.

Janet: That hopefully then creates or changes conditions outside of the theatre as well. If we could learn to attend to masculinity as just as much of a construct as femininity, and if we could learn to attend to certain kinds of intimacy and caregiving in non-sexualized ways as also masculine behavior, manly behavior, that could really change a lot.

Eero: Thank you. Is there anything else that you wanted to mention or discuss?

Janet: I guess it is just maybe worth noting the possibility that genderqueer or non-binary people in a production of *Men on Boats* might not always feel that their non-binary sense of self is seen or acknowledged. I think in some ways that might be a surprise, that doing this work doesn't enable them to feel really seen. And yet also it is not that surprising because this work is denaturalizing gender in a lot of ways. Some performers might be one step further in the process than other folks, but then when folks who have a sense of cisgender identity are doing the same denaturalizing work it makes it feel like we are all "the same" doing this work.

I guess that's just something that I've continued to think about when it comes to this play, especially with young people. I think college is such a tender age for that stuff. I don't mean to condescend to folks who are adults, but they're newly adults, and I think it's hard sometimes as the older adult in the room to know how much zooming in on the personal is going to be helpful to someone, is going to help them feel seen, is going to help them feel like they have options, and how much that is just going to put a highlighter on their difference, and their insecurities in the way that wouldn't be useful.

That is one challenge of doing this play at the college level, that I assume is a little less challenging doing this play with older actors, who maybe have a more fully defined sense of their own gender and their own comfortability talking about, and expressing that. Certainly, in a context like Ballez, where we worked together in Ballez for three years developing the piece that I performed with. There was a lot of time spent talking about personal queerness, and gender, and gender expression, and being casual with one another, as well as working formally on the piece. Doing something in a semester-long project as part of a university production doesn't necessarily lend itself to the same intimacies. In any case, the play just foregrounds this work when you do have someone in the cast who is exploring their own gender and sexuality amidst the work of rehearsals.

Eero: That's really important. Thank you. I appreciate your time in thinking through this all again. It's been great to revisit this work.