

Western University

Scholarship@Western

Department of English Publications

English Department

Fall 10-1-2019

How Do You Stage a Problem Like Kevin Spacey? Reflections on Performance and Consent, with Help from Ellie Moon and Adam Lazarus

Kim Solga

The University of Western Ontario, ksolga@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/englishpub>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Citation of this paper:

Solga, Kim, "How Do You Stage a Problem Like Kevin Spacey? Reflections on Performance and Consent, with Help from Ellie Moon and Adam Lazarus" (2019). *Department of English Publications*. 193.

<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/englishpub/193>

How do you stage a problem like Kevin Spacey? Reflections on performance and consent in the wake of #MeToo

By Kim Solga, Western University

The following short article adapts and expands upon a post I wrote for my teaching blog, The Activist Classroom, on 20 November 2017, shortly after allegations against Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and other powerful theatre and filmmakers became public. Here, I share thoughts from then, and look back upon them now, in March 2019. I was then, and continue now to be, provoked by this question: what ethical and aesthetic challenges do we face as we strive to perform – and thereby debate – issues of sexual violence and consent on our contemporary stages?

It's November 2017, and I've been watching the Weinstein horror show from the sidelines with the same complicated mix of eagerness and devastation as the next woman I know. I'm not really sure what to say, though, because the constant stream of revelations represents not the watershed of the moment (although it is – knock wood – very much a watershed), but rather the depth and breadth of a problem we all knew existed but couldn't constellate fully until now. Affect-wise, it's a weird blend of excitement and exhaustion.

I am very, very lucky: I have no instances of rape or physical abuse in my past. But still, that November, I am both gobsmacked and completely unsurprised at the morning's (every morning's) headlines. Although I am a straight, white woman of enormous social and economic privilege, like every human female on the planet I also have a good deal of first-hand experience of the subtle ways that patriarchy-as-normal functions in our daily lives, as it continually grants men the impression that they are entitled to take whatever they want while at the same time sending women – as well as non-normative, queer, and non-cis-gendered others – the keen impression that they should watch their backs.

The feelings of anger, anticipation, and fatigue that arose in me as the 2017 allegations rolled into 2018, however, never landed with force upon any one individual man – even as #MeToo and its sister movement, Time's Up, were revealing just how many individual men were very potentially guilty of extraordinary abuses.¹ Rather, as a lifelong feminist, and feminist scholar of theatre, I was then and am still now keenly aware that the #MeToo movement's greatest strength lies in how it has exposed systemic rather than just individual problems and patterns in the behaviours of both men and women.

And it has done so precisely by harnessing the power of collective storytelling in an effort to examine patriarchy's tenacious grip on our hearts, brains, and communities, even in a "woke" era.

This, of course, means also that #MeToo affords those of us who work in the theatre an ongoing opportunity to explore the ways that collective storytelling, in the form of live performance, can best activate and advance the debates that have now begun in earnest in our

patriarchal present about consent and sexual violence. In this short article I'll do some such exploring, based in my own recent viewing experiences. I'll focus on dramaturgy and design choices, as well as audience provocation, in two shows that speak to these issues, with care and complexity, from manifestly different gendered perspectives.

But first, back to November 2017 for a minute.

Aside from a complicated (and contradictory) mix of horror and relief, the number one thing I felt that autumn was this: *thank god I'm on sabbatical and don't need to talk about this with my students.*

Now don't get me wrong: I secretly love nothing more than throwing the syllabus away on a news-damp morning and chatting the real stuff out with an eager and opinionated crew. But this particular deluge felt really heavy, really loaded. I could imagine some very tense conversations, and some really challenging mediating falling to me. I could easily imagine the emotional toll that these necessary conversations would have on a range of bodies (women, non-binary, men) in the classroom.

Like any teacher, I needed some ground on which to base eventual class conversations about #MeToo, Time's Up, and the issues they raise. I needed, in other words, some stories to hook onto the politics, the paradoxes, the problematic depth. Fortunately, just as my pedagogical angst threatened to weigh me down, I was granted a gift – a teachable moment – in the form of two pieces of brand-new theatre: one about the complexities of women's desire and its relationship to consent, and the other about love, care, violence, and toxic masculinity.

Fig. Lazarus 1 + SOMETHING FROM ELLIE

Captions:

LAZARUS 1: Adam Lazarus in the poster image for *Daughter*. Photo by Alejandro Santiago.

So this, then, is not just an article about staging consent, or performing the fallout of violence. It is also an article about teaching, and about how we might use performance to talk about #MeToo with our students in ethical and empowering ways.

Asking For It (created by Ellie Moon and first produced by Nightwood Theatre at Streetcar Crowsnest in October 2017) is "documentary" theatre that begins with the Jian Ghomeshi revelations and goes on to explore Moon's and her millennial peers' experiences with the challenges of consent. Moon interviewed scores of people (mostly known, some family, lots of friends) for her piece, and their stories make up its content, voiced by four actors. In the first two thirds of the show, performers Christine Horne, Steven McCarthy, Moon, and Jaa Smith-Johnson sit at a square table, in an in-the-round auditorium configuration, speaking Moon's interview transcripts from binders into microphones. In the last portion of the show, they act out a handful of telling encounters Moon had during the interview process, using a metatheatrical structure that allows for Brechtian commentary alongside skit performances.

Asking For It begins with Ellie (character, not author – although the limits of autobiography are not totally transparent here) saying she undertook her interview project because she wanted to know more, in the wake of Ghomeshi, about consent as it is understood and practiced among her friends. Crucially, she was also motivated by her own personal confusion around the limits and boundaries of consent: as a sexually active young woman she was keenly aware that consent is an imperfect and ongoing negotiation around which we all fall down as often as not. The show ends with Ellie revealing that what she *really* wanted to figure out is why she seems to have a lot of rough sexual encounters, perhaps even *want* them, and what that says about her as a sexual agent, a feminist, and a human being.²

On the other end of the gender, and the dramaturgical, spectrum, *Daughter* is a bouffant clown show that masquerades as stand-up comedy; its main theme could be summarized as, “it’s so hard, man, to raise a little girl today!” Performer Adam Lazarus (who is the show’s co-creator, along with Jiv Parasram and Melissa D’Agostino, as well as director Ann-Marie Kerr) arrives on stage as “The Father,” wearing his 6-year-old’s butterfly wings and dancing happily to her favourite playlist. (There is less confusion in *Daughter* than in *Asking For It* around the autobiographical line between Lazarus the performer-creator and “The Father” the character, though the bouffant effect also depends upon audiences not fully realizing this until the show is over.)

Fig. Lazarus 2 + Lazarus 3

Captions:

LAZARUS 2: Adam Lazarus as The Father dances for his daughter. Photo by John Lauener.

LAZARUS 3: A moment of freedom. Photo by Murdo G Macleod.

The Father instantly and expertly entices his audience to laugh with and love him, and we stick with him – until we just can’t stick with him anymore. By the end of an increasingly uncomfortable, at times genuinely upsetting, hour he has revealed himself to be a textbook douchebag who wishes women would just go back to being simpler sub-humans, the “tits” of his porn collection instead of the “cunts” of the real world. And though he admits to loving his daughter insanely, he also admits to thinking life would be much easier without her. Toxic masculinity has by this point eaten the show, eaten The Father – and fucked the audience up completely.

Asking For It and *Daughter* share as much in common as they don’t in terms of their aesthetics, structural choices, and audience-animation devices. *Asking For It* carries us along on the nuanced good will and best-friend vibe of Ellie’s character; it also activates our natural human desire to nose around in other people’s unspoken (and often taboo) thoughts, as Ellie and her co-performers turn the pages of their binders full of (men and) women. *Daughter* converges with *Asking* as it similarly channels our curiosities around sexual taboos and one another’s hidden beliefs about them, but Lazarus departs from Moon as he deliberately sets about making us seasick, pushing and pulling us in and out of sympathy with his character’s toxic

tendencies. Ellie is “likeable” in a way that The Father ultimately is not; in both cases, though, likeability becomes an effective critical lure. Because like them or not, both of these characters have enormous problems with consent – the kinds of problems that, according to some of the most unhelpful discourse to emerge from #MeToo on Twitter and Facebook, nobody is supposed to have. No means no. Consent is consent! You get it or you’re a rapist. Right?

Well, in the real world, maybe not quite. For Ellie, the problem of consent is both that no means no, *period*, and that consent is always, in lived practice, way pricklier and more confusing than one endgame phrase conveys for most well-intentioned humans most of the time. For The Father, the problem of consent is that love for his wife and daughter drives him, but the tools he uses to shape his actions towards them were forged in a perilous melange of patriarchal enculturation, where boys are supposed to be boys and girls are supposed to be first aliens and then sex objects, and extraordinary access to online pornography – which reinforces his “natural” objectification of women to a shockingly violent degree. (Some of the most disturbing scenes in *Daughter* arrive as The Father describes his meticulous online porn cataloguing system, before he confesses to having watched a Japanese video that appears – to his shock and confusion, as well as to ours – to have ended “slasher”-style in a genuine rape.) The Father is also apparently without any family, beyond his wife and daughter, and therefore without any male mentorship and support as he flails into adult manhood, and therewith into chaos.³

What’s the dramaturgical formula that lets a piece of theatre press effectively on the complexities of issues of consent and violent masculinity? Certainly both Lazarus and Moon demonstrate the capacity for verbatim on one hand and clown on the other to provoke without trying to present answers, or closure. But more is at stake in staging these conversations than choosing the “correct” genre as a container. One of the things that struck me right away about both *Daughter* and *Asking For It* was the way they were set up, spatially. The organization of each room was carefully designed to foster particular kinds of reactions, supporting each piece’s critical interventions.

When I entered the Crow’s studio space to see *Asking For It*, immediately I felt like a citizen, not just an observer. The studio was configured as though for a debate, with banks of audience members facing each other, and more around the sides of the playing space. When the actors entered, they did so from our world: they came into the auditorium as the doors shut, and they entered from the side of one of the rakes. Throughout their presentation they looked at and spoke with each other and with us. We looked at them, and at one another, in a dynamic exchange of gazes. The message, for me: we are all in this together. We are going to encounter a series of troubling ideas, and our goal will be to reckon with them in a shared way.

Daughter’s space was arranged differently – though with equal critical care. Upstairs at the Theatre Centre’s (reconfigurable) Franco Boni auditorium, I entered to a proscenium setup complete with traditional, tight rake. When Lazarus/The Father appeared, dancing and flitting about in his little girl’s decorative wings before our collective gaze, the almost-bare stage and the focused lighting told us very clearly that he was the only performer we were meant to

watch and invest in. The proscenium configuration, lighting and sound design all effectively framed the clown's opening illusion, shouting: "Funny, awesome, story-telling dad! Look this way for a light-hearted good time!" The dark and complicated breakdown of this illusion over the course of the show, however, meant that eventually the whole audience was sitting in staggering discomfort, in the dark, side by side, wondering literally whether or not or how much to clap for Lazarus during what may have been the most disquieting curtain call I have ever experienced.

Fig. Lazarus 4

Captions:

The Father is taunted into violence. Photo by John Lauener.

Inevitably, of course, my encounter with each of these characters is mediated by my gender, sexual orientation, social positioning, and life experiences, not only by the works' dramaturgical and design choices. While we well know that all spectatorship is individualized in such ways, in these two shows audience members are likely to experience that individuation more directly and profoundly than they would in other works of theatre about less charged (more apparently "neutral") topics. Bluntly: everyone's skin is in these games, and we're made by both Lazarus and Moon to feel our personal investments deeply.

I found *The Father* quite funny at first, but something about the character Lazarus was portraying bothered me almost from the start. He seemed to have the involuntary habit of making absolutely everything – from his daughter's musical tastes, to his wife's pregnancy and even her difficult labour – completely and utterly about him. I remember thinking to myself, as he acted out (to hilarious and astonished effect) his wife painfully giving birth to their girl: *does this guy really think it's ok to make his loved one's physical trauma about him?!*

Turns out that question is the show's whole point – because of course *The Father* thinks this is ok. *He thinks this is love!* As a female spectator, a feminist spectator, feeling this question arise in me meant recognizing that I was watching a character who honestly believed this self-centred approach to his loved ones represented his care for them. The question came to me mid-show out of pure frustration: *what a jerk, I thought to myself. I'm tired of this.* But by the end of the piece Lazarus' storytelling had brought me to a more thoughtful place. This man is not all jerk, I saw: he believes he is a good person! He believes he is trying hard to be the right kind of man. He knows he's struggling with it – but he does not seem to realize that he *is not even close*. Worst of all: he does not seem to know how to do any better, nor even who to ask for help.

With *Asking For It*, my spectatorial experience was entirely different – more cozy, and altogether more identificatory. I attribute this to Ellie's femininity, which presented not unlike my own, as well as to my affinity for some of the sexual interests she expresses during the show. (Similarity breeds patriotism – this is one of the problems at the heart of the Weinstein

moment, of course.) Despite this chummy lure, though, Moon simultaneously disarmed me and put significant pressure on my willingness to be disarmed to such a degree.

A case in point: in the last third of the show, Moon and Horne re-create a conversation on a bus between Ellie and a friend with whom she's had a boozy dinner, as part of the interview project. The friend notes that Ellie needs to step outside of her comfort zone and interview strangers if her project is to have any significance. Pushed, Ellie approaches a man at the other end of the bus, brandishing her phone. She says something like: *hey, hi, sorry to bother you. I'm doing interviews about peoples' experiences of consent. Could I ask you some questions about how you experience consent, and navigate its challenges?*

The guy is not interested. Nor is he sympathetic. He offers a totally understandable, very frustrated response. He says something like: *if I had approached YOU on this bus, what would you have thought? You admit you're a bit tipsy, and you're asking me to talk into your phone, for some "project"; how would you feel in my position?*

He has a total point, I thought to myself immediately. (It was a sinking feeling.)

But then Ellie says, bluntly but quietly, to him and to me and to all of us thinking to ourselves, *yeah, hey – he has a point!:*

But: I ASKED you.

Ellie wants answers to questions she's not, as a woke young woman, supposed to be asking – that maybe I, as a good feminist teacher and scholar, shouldn't even be asking. *What exactly is consent, and what's crossing the line? Why do I sometimes want to cross the line myself? Can I be a feminist and cross the line?* In the process of looking for these answers, Ellie meets a not insignificant number of people who think she's being kind of a jerk, a "feminazi." These folks make superficially very persuasive arguments that they are feminist allies, except careful scrutiny reveals they really aren't. When we meet those folks, they make some sense, enough to momentarily disorient me and what I believe to be true; this "some sense" strikes me like a dopamine hit, the same kind of hit that the instantaneous Facebook "like" generates. Perhaps it's also a hit not so unlike The Father's release, as he desperately punches the other inhabitants of his self-centred world in the struggle to find the man he wants to be.

Late in 2018 I got an email from Jillian Keiley, the Artistic Director of the English company at the National Arts Centre. The NAC was mounting *Daughter* and hosting a live national conversation about it afterward. Would I come and be a moderator for that discussion? I immediately jumped at the chance. Having thought a good deal about *Daughter* in the weeks since seeing it I knew well that the sheer complexity of the choices made by Lazarus and his co-creators comprised more than teachable moments in the wake of #MeToo: *they were moments that*

simply needed teaching. Both *Daughter* and *Asking For It* activate an urgent debate, using all of live theatre's powers of profound discombobulation. So let's have that debate then, for real.

Some time after seeing both of these pieces I realized something else central to their construction. *Asking For It* is built to be polyvocal, while Lazarus and his co-creators deliberately create a universe that demonstrates how powerful, seductive, and ultimately dangerous a single, virtuosic, *literally* self-centred male voice can be.

Ellie isn't without selfishness, without her problems. But the show constructed around her works actively to centre others' voices, including ours. It reveals the parameters of the debate we need to have, and it shapes a space for conversation. Ellie discovers her own blind spots through the revelations the other voices in her play provide, and we in her audience are invited to do the same.

Daughter, of course, refuses polyvocality precisely because The Father isn't capable of admitting others into his worldview in a real and meaningful way. The discussion we opened up after its presentation at the NAC therefore proved cathartic, and essential. The audience, Keiley and I talked together about people we knew who resembled The Father, the ways in which our culture cultivates the needs and wants of men like him, and the fraught question of how to raise young men now, in supportive, loving, and still feminist ways.

Too often it can feel like the loud concert of voices hashtagging #MeToo or #TimesUp or #NotAllMen are trying and failing to be truly polyvocal; the theatre, however, bears the capacity to remind us what listening to one another's experiences, hurt, want, and needs can really mean.

Works Cited

Gay, Roxane. *Bad Feminist*. Harper Perennial, 2014.

Gay, Roxane, ed. *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*. Harper Perennial, 2018.

Willis, Emma. "'Acting in the Real World': Acting Methodologies, Power and Gender." *Theatre Research International* 43.3 (2018): 258-69. Print.

¹ As of the time of writing, Weinstein awaits trial, set for June 2019, on five active charges of sexual misconduct and rape. In Massachusetts, Spacey is awaiting trial on charges of felony indecent assault and battery of a busboy. While other investigations into allegations against Spacey are ongoing, no further charges as of this moment (March 2019) have been brought against him. For a clear and well-documented summary of other allegations specifically within the theatre industry, see Willis.

² In keeping with thinking about this show as a teachable moment, I'd add here that anyone teaching *Asking For It* – this issue's script – might wish also to assign their students some reading from Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist*, as well as her more recent edited collection, *Not That Bad*.

³ I want to thank Karen Fricker for first pointing this detail out to me.