

# Reading Past the Heterosexual Imperative

## *Dress Suits to Hire*

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*Kate Davy*

*Lesbians should be mistresses of discrepancies, knowing that resistance lies in the change of context.*

—Joan Nestle (1984:236)

When Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver embarked on the collaboration that resulted in *Dress Suits to Hire*, all three artists had a history of creating work to be performed in the WOW Cafe, a lesbian theatre space in Manhattan's East Village.<sup>1</sup> An unmistakable specificity is evident in pieces performed at WOW—the address is clearly lesbian. Freely borrowing from popular culture forms, WOW artists produce pieces based on scenarios from familiar, recognizable entertainment genres. In this work, they construct subcultural, under-the-text imagery, metaphors, and conventions derived from lesbian culture. Making work for this context assumes a certain coherence of exchange between performance and spectators that cannot be presumed in other arenas. Meanings shift radically when a site-specific work is taken out of its production context.

From its inception, *Dress Suits* was made to be performed at P.S. 122, an East Village venue for new, or nonmainstream, theatre, dance, music, and performance art.<sup>2</sup> Hughes, Shaw, and Weaver understood that the tacit assumptions operant when making work specifically for WOW and its audience—assumptions that inform the nature and shape of the work—could not be taken for granted outside WOW turf. Working toward performance in a sociologically (if not artistically) mainstream, predominantly heterosexual space influenced the narrative and performative strategies developed for *Dress Suits* in an attempt to resist dominant culture readings of the piece. While the objective remained the same as that of WOW productions, *Dress Suits* marks a significant departure from the style and some of the strategies that distinguish WOW theatre work.

A basic tenet of reception theory is that a production and its audience are not separate. A performance text intersects with individual audience mem-

1. In a publicity shot for *Dress Suits to Hire*, Michigan (Lois Weaver) gazes at the viewer through the gartered leg of Deeluxe (Peggy Shaw). The photos accompanying this article are from the May 1987 P.S. 122 production in New York. (Photo by Eva Weiss)



bers who, in turn, intersect with it—producing meaning in terms of their own relationships with discourses and practices in society. Meanings do not reside exclusively in the work of art, nor solely in individual readings. Moreover, the context in which a work and its audience are positioned materially influences reception. For instance, under certain conditions a work that attempts to subvert dominant culture's system of representation can instead be assimilated into it, thereby reinforcing, rather than disrupting, its codes.

The WOW Café is a context that presumes a lesbian worldview. In this context, WOW artists create a theatre *for* lesbians, a theatre that responds to lesbian subjectivity. *Dress Suits* attempts to maintain this stance in a context that presumes a heterosexual worldview. Hughes, Shaw, and Weaver devised strategies of resistance for this context that manifest a fierce struggle to thwart the assimilation of their discourse. My purpose in this essay is to examine the dimensions of this struggle and, through my reading of the work, indicate some of the wider implications for lesbian performance in particular and feminist performance in general.

When misreadings of lesbian work occur even within WOW space—as they did in WOW's Spring 1988 production of Lisa Kron's *Paradykes Lost*—the difficulty of resisting an appropriation by the spectator into dominant, heterosexual cultural readings is apparent. Two critics reviewing the performance eschewed the play's lesbian perspective by imposing a heterosexual worldview on the work and reading the performance through this worldview, thereby misinterpreting a crucial dimension of the piece.

A closer look at the response to *Paradykes Lost* informs the project of *Dress Suits*. Set in the parlor of an English manor during the 1920s, *Para-*

*dykes Lost* loosely follows a conventional murder mystery formula. Among the cast are a detective, an ingenue, a couple, a butler, and an assortment of eccentric singles. All the characters have women's names, all are explicitly identified as lesbian in the dialog, and all the roles were played by women. Yet in her review for *The New York Native*—a gay newspaper—Amy L. Eddings writes about “the all-woman cast who play male characters and refer to each other as ‘she’ ” (1988:29). This represents a fundamental misreading of a butch/femme dynamic that is the M.O. of this detective spoof, as well as the modus operandi of most WOW work. The cast of *Paradykes* most definitely did not play male characters—they refer to each other as “she” because they play lesbian characters.

Writing for *The Village Voice*, Robert Massa also read *Paradykes* as drag performance: “As in men’s camp, the characters refer to each other as ‘she’ regardless of gender [. . .]” (1988:97). Although WOW productions are similar to male camp performances and Theatre of the Ridiculous in their farcical style, there are important differences. Male drag emphasizes the illusionistic qualities of impersonation. The actor attempts to simulate that which he is not, the “other.” Instead of foregrounding dominant culture’s fiercely polarized gender roles, men’s camp assumes them and plays them out. Like much of men’s camp, WOW artists use scenarios from popular performance forms as sources for their narratives, but WOW performers do not adopt the heterosexual imperative operant in these scenarios. They do not impersonate women and men in heterosexual couplings. Ironically, male camp tends to reinscribe, rather than undermine, the dominant culture paradigms it appropriates for its farce and means to parody.

Men—both gay and straight—are the intended audience for male camp, while the projected spectator in WOW productions is lesbian—a subject who, as defined by Monique Witting, stands outside dominant culture categories as not-man, not-woman.<sup>3</sup> WOW performances efface a heterosexual address by constructing a spectator who is neither man nor woman but lesbian—a subject defined in terms of sexual similarity. Same-sexuality is the model and organizing principle from which WOW artists work.

Massa goes on in his review to describe a dimension of his own position as spectator—“As a gay man, I feel less left out at WOW than at straight burlesque”—and then singles out one performance in *Paradykes* to critique: “Kate Stafford as the detective manages to suggest Cary Grant without caricature. Even I swooned” (1988:97). Could there be any clearer evidence of the role desire plays in reception? Here, a gay man appropriates a lesbian character by reading her performance as “in drag,” then swoons over the male character he constructs. Unfortunately, in appropriating the character, Massa deprived himself of the radical experience of the play.

Given such misappropriations, it is useful to examine how butch/femme as a system of representation in lesbian theatre differs from drag performance. The iconography and dynamics of butch/femme culture present in WOW productions is not, as it is often described, about cross-dressing. Wearing the gender of the “other” sex, in dominant culture terms, is not the point. Nor is it about drag in the sense of simulation. No attempt is made to hide the lesbian beneath a mask of male or female gender identity. To fool the audience, even momentarily, is not the objective. In their essay “The Misunderstanding: Toward a More Precise Sexual Vocabulary,” Esther Newton and Shirley Walton wrote:

The terms ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ refer to gay erotic identities, derived historically from dominant gender categories but now distinct. Thus

'butch' is a gay erotic identity in which symbols from the male gender category play a significant part, and 'femme' is the complementary gay identity, drawing on feminine gender symbols (1984:245).

As a dimension of erotic identity, butch/femme is about sexuality and its myriad nuances. It is also about gender in that it appropriates gender in its social articulation and representational construction, but not as it functions in material social relations in dominant cultural terms.<sup>4</sup> In butch/femme iconography, attributes which in dominant culture are associated with strict gender roles are not sex-class specific. Worn by lesbians, these attributes have meanings for lesbians in a same-sex, lesbian culture that do not necessarily symbolize conformity to rules of gender behavior and the oppositional dynamics of polarized gender roles.

Femme and butch constructions exist outside of these paradigms and foreground the problem of confusing sexuality with gender. When sexuality and gender are mistakenly conflated and collapsed into one "sex/gender" concept and assumed to be social facts according to a binary opposition (one sex/gender being male; the other sex/gender being not-male), the effect is to construe sex and gender as the same phenomenon. Moreover, it is to construe sex and gender as "natural"—a law of nature enforced by a law of culture. Compulsory heterosexuality. Sexuality and gender are discrete, albeit linked, phenomena in what Gayle Rubin has described as the sex-gender system (1978). Butch/femme as a social dynamic in lesbian culture is a manifestation of the separation of sexuality from polarized gender constructs and imperative heterosexuality.<sup>5</sup>

Each WOW artist mines the material, social terrain of butch/femme culture somewhat differently in her theatre work. In *Paradykes Lost*, Lisa Kron's use of butch/femme iconography must be largely overlooked in order to read her production in heterosexual terms. For instance, although Kate Stafford's detective "costume" was butch, her makeup and hair were femme in style. The stance and deportment of another butch character in *Paradykes* echoed the femme. When dominant culture notions of man and woman are "present" it is *not* because they are presented as such—they are read into the performance.

The title *Paradykes Lost* is rich in canonical connotation. It critiques the absence of lesbian work in the canons of theatre and dramatic literature. Ironically, a lesbian perspective is (re)found, recuperated, and given a voice in productions like *Paradykes*, only to be obfuscated in heterosexual readings of the work. The dykes are lost once again.

For the makers of *Dress Suits*, then, the project is to insist that the lesbian represent herself on her own terms, through strategies that thwart rather than facilitate the propensity to read her signs and symbols from a heterosexual perspective.

*Dress Suits to Hire* is set in a cramped storefront room of a cheesy New York clothing rental store where two women live and where clearly no one ever comes to rent anything. Before the performance begins, the audience can see the set. It is constructivist in style—its back and side walls comprised of empty frames that delineate two large windows and a door. Another empty frame is positioned downstage. It faces front, suggesting a window through which the audience can look into the private space of the room. Positioned in this vertical plane it echoes both the illusionary fourth wall of frontal staging, and the proscenium "opening" of theatrical space—the theatre's keyhole through which the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator is engaged.

Because the stage embodies the “to-be-looked-at” dimension of the theatrical apparatus—the site of the spectacle, the artificial, the histrionic, the site of deceit, conceit, and disguise—it is sometimes linked metaphorically with “the feminine.” Of course, ultimately, “woman”—woman as sign, as the collective essence of femininity—is conflated with spectacle itself, *woman as spectacle*, woman as object of the spectatorial gaze. This gaze, the looking itself, is male. As E. Ann Kaplan explains in her book *Women and Film*, “The gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the ‘masculine’ position” (1983:30).

In their collaboration on *Dress Suits to Hire*, Hughes, Shaw, and Weaver created a production in which this configuration—one that constitutes the gaze as masculine and locates both the site and recipient of the gaze as feminine—is played out with a vengeance and a twist. The apparatus is made aware of itself—woman looks back. And she is femme.

As the lights come up at the beginning of the play, two performers sit across a small table looking into each other’s eyes. Their bodies are covered with identical floor-length boudoir robes made from sturdy fabric that hangs from them in a way that hides their bodies. Deeluxe (played by Shaw) sings a song quietly to herself as she pulls nylon stockings onto each leg, fastens them to garters, and puts high-heeled shoes on her feet. The song is a list of things she is going to do for and to her body—“Gonna buy myself a diamond ring / Gonna stuff my nose with cocaine”—which she sings as she dons the clothing and accessories that are the trappings of femininity. She pulls on long, black evening gloves and, still singing, crosses to the downstage window. Just as she starts to look out the window at the audience, she is attacked, mid-song, by her own right hand which—like a separate, possessed being—grabs her throat and strangles her. She staggers backward and dies noisily center stage.

As Wittig suggests, lesbian as a category may sidestep dominant constructions and classifications of woman and man in the economy of the sex-gender system, but the lesbian performer nonetheless confronts the complex significant workings of the female body as sign the moment she sets foot on stage. From the outset, Shaw and Weaver, in their identical, body-concealing garb, begin the arduous process of interrupting the dynamics of signification that in dominant culture conflate women exclusively with the body.

In theatre, as in the rest of culture, women as speaking subjects are missing from representation. In their place, “woman” appears as a construction that signifies a (feminine) essence intrinsic to all women. This construction is anathema to women as historical beings and social subjects because it reduces them to “nature,” “mother,” and ultimately, the object of (male) desire. The absence of women as speaking subjects in representation is central to what feminist scholars have described as the crisis in representation. For practitioners who work in forms that have a visual dimension, the central issue is how to image the female body without engendering “woman.”

Feminist filmmakers and theorists have accomplished much in the project of dismantling “woman”; from identifying and articulating the male gaze and the ways in which the female body is placed in the service of that gaze through operations of voyeurism and fetishism,<sup>6</sup> to manipulating the narrative and cinematic mechanisms that produce meaning in film through strategies that subvert or disrupt the cinematic apparatus. While it is not possible to adequately describe here the many important ways feminist

filmmakers work, a brief description of a crucial dimension of Yvonne Rainer's film *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985) serves the purpose of this discussion by demonstrating a significant approach to grappling with the problematic of imaging the female body.

Working against the dynamics of the male gaze, Rainer constructs the female protagonist in her film by means of a voice-over. The spectator hears the protagonist but never sees her, for Rainer refuses to embody her voice in a single, coherent image of a woman's body. Rainer removes the object of the cinematic fetish (the fetishized female body) from the screen, thwarting the operations of voyeurism. This strategy produces a kind of "radical absence" that echoes the nature of filmic representation itself. For, unlike theatre, film by definition is marked by absences—the objects the camera "sees" are not in fact present at the moment of screening.<sup>7</sup>

Since some of the mechanisms operant in cinema are similar to those at work in live performance, feminist theatre scholars and practitioners have turned to film theory and practice for insight and direction. Although this research continues to be enormously fruitful, there are obvious limitations. In theatre, for example, the mechanisms of voyeurism, fetishism, and scopophilia (pleasure in looking) work in analogous ways to film, but not in the same ways. Feminist filmmakers work both with and against the (inter)mediating "eye" of the camera which, together with editing, create the illusion of point of view, temporal continuity, and in general what Stephen Heath terms "narrative space" (1986). If Mary Ann Doane (1982) is right when she suggests that the absence of the live body in filmed images makes it possible to fetishize that body (precisely because of the extreme distance from the image/object this absence engenders and permits),<sup>8</sup> then the very presence of the performing body in live, three-dimensional, theatrical space suggests a venue for undermining the mechanisms that contribute the fetishism in representational systems that have a visual dimension.

Indeed the conditions of the theatre—the very *presentness* of the theatrical apparatus, and the *immediacy* of theatrical representation—are key to the subversion of "woman" within *Dress Suits*. Just as Rainer takes filmic absence to its logical extreme in her film, Hughes, Shaw, and Weaver seize the theatre as an "arena of presence," over-constructing the performative dimensions of their piece, to produce a kind of "radical presence." By over-constructing the body in *Dress Suits*, the operations of theatrical representation are over-determined, foregrounded, and made visible, thereby undermining, paradoxically, the construction of *woman as body*.

A number of devices are employed repeatedly and cumulatively in *Dress Suits* to undercut the illusory dimension of theatre and insist on the material presence of the body. Opening the performance with Shaw dressing on stage, literally putting on femininity, foregrounds gender as "man-made." Wearing the reference marks of femininity under her robe—referents that inscribe the body as female and, conversely, the female as body—Deeluxe sings the body's pleasures before killing it off. Significantly, the script's first stage direction states that the body is "dead for the rest of the play."

After Deeluxe collapses, the audience hears the high-pitched yapping of a small dog. Michigan (Weaver), with the dog in her lap, has been seated with her back to the corpse-like Deeluxe, who lies between her and the audience. The dog—a battery-operated toy—rouses Michigan. (Significantly, it is the mechanical dog that bears a woman's name, "Linda"—the characters do not.) Michigan turns, sees Deeluxe, and begins frantically to search for a telephone. She pulls out a pink, plastic receiver, puts it to her



2. Linda yaps in Michigan's lap as Deeluxe lies dead with Little Peter still at her throat. (Photo by Dona Ann McAdams)

ear and says, "Hello? Ninth Precinct?" The cord on the receiver has been cut and the rest of the telephone apparatus is missing. As in *Lady Dick*, Hughes' 1985 production with WOW, a character calls on the "authorities" for help.<sup>9</sup> The obviously cut cord signals that this attempt "to get outside" is futile. The action of the performance literally and figuratively remains within the confines of this small room, circumscribed by the nature of theatrical representation. The challenge is to find a way out from within, to articulate another kind of author(ity), one inside the discourse of *Dress Suits*, but outside the Law.

Michigan's monolog that follows is a kind of micro-articulation mapping the terms of the rest of the performance. In her phone conversation, Michigan refers only to "the body," emphasizing that the murder she calls to report is not the death of Deeluxe. This distinction between the speaking subject and the body is further complicated when Michigan speaks of her desire. In answer to questions from the Ninth Precinct officer (as a matter of course, or better, as a matter of gender, we presume the officer on the other end of the line is male), Michigan smiles seductively and says slowly and suggestively,

Yes there certainly is a body. Did I discover it? Many years ago.  
[. . .] I lay down on the bed and discovered the body. [. . .] And  
after that first time I would discover the body again and again.

She suggests a distinction between the (dead) body and the lesbian body that is the object of her desire. A repeated and insistent articulation of lesbian desire within the piece positions it outside heterosexuality both as a social institution and representational model, by realigning what Jill Dolan

describes as the “dynamics of desire” between performance and its spectators. Dolan writes, “desire is not necessarily a fixed, male-owned commodity, but can be exchanged, with much different meaning, between women. When the locus of desire changes, the demonstration of sexuality and gender roles also changes” (1987:173). *Dress Suits* breaks the “heterosexual contract” that Teresa de Lauretis identifies as “the very site in which the social relations of gender and thus gender ideology are reproduced in everyday life” (1987:17).

Of course the heterosexual model in representation is not dismantled simply and unproblematically, especially outside a lesbian performance context. In *Dress Suits* a narrative/performative strategy addresses the dilemma in the form of “Little Peter”—an entity that resides in the right hand of Deeluxe. Although the spectator doesn’t learn his name until later in the piece, “Little Peter” as a performative “figure of speech” is identified almost immediately. Michigan doesn’t report a murder to the Ninth Precinct, she says,

There’s a man in here. [. . .] He lives with us. More with her than with me. Me, this man, and the body.

The hand that strangles the body represents the male economy that “the body” was constructed to serve. If “the body” signifies women as trade, commodity, and use value in the sexual marketplace, and “woman” in the representational marketplace, then it is significant that the murdering hand is an extension of that body for it belongs to the male economy that inscribes and appropriates it.

The not-so-subtle phallic signifier, Little Peter, is the force that repeatedly attempts to contain what de Lauretis calls the “trauma of gender—the potential disruption of the social fabric and of white male privilege [. . .]” (1987:21). That he resides in Deeluxe acknowledges poignantly the great complexity of imagining a different order while immersed in the current sociosymbolic order.

During the opening monolog-cum-monodrama, Michigan “redecorates.” She performs a seemingly senseless series of actions over the ostensibly dead body. She covers the waist with a small table, for instance, and then removes it; she spreads the arms out away from the body and then moves them back—all the while relating in explicit language the history of her lesbian erotic desire, identifying herself as an “animal” (“Being a girl is just a phase I’m going through”). It’s as though she performs some transformative ritual designed to (re)articulate and transform this dead body, resurrect it, into the lesbian body.

In grappling with the problematic of the body, this opening monolog also establishes exhibitionism both as subject matter and an identifying dimension of theatre itself. Shaw and Weaver are performers who present performers that move from one showbiz “turn” to another, using recognizable bits—the stand-up-comic routine, the song-and-dance number—that foreground the theatrical nature of live performance as well as the voyeur/exhibitionist relationship it engenders. Michigan says to Deeluxe’s murderous right hand:

I suppose you know what this will mean. There will be no show. She will be unable to do the show. You’re not going to like this. [. . .] She probably won’t be able to perform anymore!

Hundreds of narratives, from *Antigone* to *'Night Mother* and *Fatal Attraction*, end with the physical death of a woman, or her psychological death or, as in (romantic) comedy, her recuperation through marriage. *Dress Suits* inverts narrative closure by beginning the play with a death, the momentous event that is usually the target of narrative suspense, the resolution of processes of expectation. Hughes' play also undercuts those narratives that begin with a murder which propels the action toward an eventual resolution—ten minutes into *Dress Suits* the body is resurrected.

As befits her name, Deeluxe is resurrected "in spectacle." Pulling herself up from the floor, she "over sings" (forcefully and very dramatically) the song "*Amato Mio*" from *Gilda*, a Rita Hayworth film. At the same time, she pulls a large, gold, gaudy accordion fan up behind her. It is as tall as she is and frames her still-robed body, à la Cecil B. de Mille. Michigan hands her a bouquet of tulips attached to an electric cord. As Deeluxe strikes a finale pose against the fan, the tulips light up. Deeluxe is "in spectacle"—decorated, lit-up like a Christmas tree—a performance within a performance.

It is significant that in this micro-extravaganza musical number—one that refers visually to the genre of Hollywood spectacle—Deeluxe is posed against the fan still wearing a shapeless robe. The curvaceous female body, conventionally associated with this Hollywood image, is hidden. Hence, an image that invites a fetishistic response is deconstructed by "displaying" a hidden body. Throughout *Dress Suits*, iconic expectations are repeatedly thwarted by images that are consistently skewed: there is always something wrong with the "picture."

Resurrected, Deeluxe grabs a piggybank and threatens to leave home. While it seems as though this scene is one she's enacted many times before, like everything in the play, it's unclear. Nothing in *Dress Suits* is stable, not the time in which the action takes place, not the characters, not the actions. Even dialects and idioms shift in style from lofty theatrical monolog to lesbian bar-culture slang to underworld gun moll to Midwestern twang. The linguistic, behavioral, and gestural signs indicative of a core character from which all else is merely a departure, are repeatedly subverted. Michigan and Deeluxe change clothes and personas frequently.

Although smacking of vaudeville and burlesque in its humor and presentational style, the ambiance of *Dress Suits* is definitely not an upbeat, playful one of "let's make a show" for each other. Instead, there is a seemingly random, fragmented exploration of the dark side of sexuality. The atmosphere is heavy, private, subterranean. The spectator can feel the weight and import of a private symbol system without necessarily being able to decipher, decode, or complete it. Gone is the butch/femme play that is a hallmark of WOW productions, but that threatens to reinforce rather than subvert gender polarizations. Gone, too, are conventional narratives (like those based on romance novel formulas, or television sitcoms) that can be parodied in lesbian performance contexts. Instead, throughout *Dress Suits'* roughly 75 minutes, there are continuous shifts narratively and visually as the artists attempt to create, moment-to-moment, points of identification with the potential for engaging their subjectivity as lesbians, as women, as girls, as femme, as butch, as femme fatale. And as "animal," nonhumans (the cat, palomino, werewolf) who transgress the boundaries of the body and conventional femininity.

These points of identification are continuously, almost breathlessly, constructed and then dissolved and are not to be confused with a single, coherent "point of identification" related to some unproblematic notion of

identity with which all well-meaning spectators can identify. Manipulating the operations of identification through an articulation of many different and rapidly changing points of view creates a continuously shifting subject field. Spectators are invited to repeatedly (re)engage with shifting subject positions, intermittently activating certain kinds of subjectivity. Narrative episodes in *Dress Suits* interrupt narrative coherence—the “flowing with” narrative that ostensibly comes “naturally” but is in fact manufactured by the processes and organizing principles of narrative itself (see de Lauretis 1984).

Within *Dress Suits*’ shifting subject field, power relations are repeatedly redistributed. Both women in “Dress Suits” are “suited” with femme iconography, so that when one emerges as more powerful than the other, the action is played out in the context of sameness—same sex partner, same erotic identity. If power is understood as distributed according to “difference,” then, again, the “picture” is out of kilter. The “difference” is in erotic role, which is not fixed—power positionings change, slide back and forth, throughout the performance. Power is exchanged between the two performers.

The underlying assumption is that power and sexual desire are deeply connected. Power is not denied women in *Dress Suits*. Lesbian theatre artists refuse to agree that power belongs solely to male constructs. But because power dynamics and gender identity are fiercely linked in dominant discourses (in positionings that in heterosexual culture are seemingly inextricably grounded in the configuration “male/female,” construed as active/passive, powerful/powerless, and prescribed according to gender) the butch/femme play that works so subversively in lesbian performance contexts is not employed in *Dress Suits*. Outside of lesbian venues, butch/femme can too easily be read as male/female. *Dress Suits* scrambles the signals, the processes of identification, when it “unhooks” power from polarized gender relations and heterosexual desire.

The butch, however, is not erased—she appears within the femme construct. Once Deeluxe removes her concealing robe, an iconographic process is begun whereby meaning is layered upon meaning, establishing an increasingly complex iconicity. When Deeluxe “disrobes,” she is seen wearing a black, strapless, waist-length corset, black satin panties, and a black garter belt. Her back to the audience, Deeluxe faces Michigan who, as spectator, watches while Deeluxe dresses herself in a strapless, full-length, satin evening gown, gartered nylon stockings, heels, long black evening gloves, and dangling earrings. Deeluxe bends over, throws her mane of curly red hair forward, and brushes it. Standing, she throws her head back suggestively, and extends her arms to suggest she is displaying herself for Michigan.

She is in full masquerade, that is, she has *made a spectacle of herself*. She has, in Mary Russo’s words, “put on femininity with a vengeance” (1986:224). But what prevents this flaunting of femininity from being recuperated back into “woman”? Shaw’s demeanor, the performative quality of her work, is important in understanding how this problematic is worked out in the complexity of Deeluxe as an iconic sign. Michigan refers to Deeluxe as, “Half woman, half something weird. French, maybe. All cat.” Shaw’s masquerade hints at the butch, but she does not fully play it at this point in the performance.

Having presented herself for Weaver’s attentive gaze, Shaw slowly turns to the audience and sinuously walks downstage to sing another Rita Hayworth song—“Put the Blame on Mame” from *Gilda*—in her own version

as “Put the Blame on Me.” The relationship between performer, character, and spectator that Elin Diamond delineates in her reading of Brecht (1988) is multiplied and problematized as Shaw performs Deeluxe performing Rita Hayworth performing still another character, Gilda. Shaw culls bits of gesture, stance, and attitude from Hayworth’s performing style in *Gilda*, and then overstates and overplays them in her own performance, projecting an ironic, knowing attitude about what she is doing. It’s as if she’s winking at the audience, sharing a private understanding. The critique of objectification is clear. Shaw plays the fetishized object of the male gaze and at the same time critiques that position.

The articulation and circulation of the gaze is further complicated when Shaw looks back at the spectators and interacts with them directly. With Weaver positioned as “onstage spectator” watching her from behind while the audience watches her from the front, Shaw is caught in the fourth wall. In the P.S. 122 production and on tour in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the audience seating section was so close to the performing area that spectators seated on the floor in front of the first row were literally at Shaw’s feet. During the “Blame” song, she played the vamp, the femme fatale, transforming the theatre into an intimate cabaret, choosing individual women in the audience to address seductively—teasing them with the possibility of tossing out one of her gloves. Not only are the dynamics of same-sex desire absolutely clear in this sequence—the address lesbian—but the physical separation and psychological distance provided by the fourth wall of proscenium staging is breached.

The enormous influence on reception of this crucial dimension of distance was apparent in performances at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where the production circumstances were especially skewed. A physical distance of several yards separated the performing space from the audience seating sections, establishing a kind of Wagnerian “mystic gulf” that produced a certain “lesbian theatre under glass” aura. Because Shaw could not close the gap and indicate precisely the spectators she was addressing, it was not difficult to apply a dominant culture model, read from that perspective, and engage in fetishizing the image.<sup>10</sup>

Shaw plays the femme utterly in her “Blame” song so that when she shifts to the butch, during the play’s one blatantly conventional seduction scene, her masquerade becomes so (over)loaded with seemingly contradictory meanings that it virtually “vibrates” and threatens to rupture. The scene ostensibly takes place at the pumps of a desert filling station. Weaver wears a white full slip that clings to her body, and pink high-heeled boots that zip to her ankles. Shaw ties a bandana around her neck, puts a cowboy hat on her head, a toothpick in her mouth and, as the theme song from the film *A Man and a Woman* swells up, crosses the stage to Weaver, moving (according to a stage direction) “as much like a cowboy as you can in a strapless gown and heels.” Weaver “comes on” to Shaw who plays the butch fully while still embedded visually in femme iconography.

On stage, Shaw and Weaver are frequently described as “hot,” and the stage in this seduction scene is exceedingly sexually charged. The femme and femme-cum-butch tease each other, seduce each other, until Shaw pulls Weaver to her in a long stage kiss—the music from *A Man and a Woman* swells again. Like the sentence “This is not a pipe,” that Magritte scrawled in French under his careful drawing of a pipe, the sound track in this scene states, “This is *not* a man and a woman.” Taken together, the elements of this scene conspire to skew the potential for gender polarization in butch/femme play by over-determining femme iconography and

inserting the butch into it—creating an especially ironic distance from the body, or masquerade.<sup>11</sup>

In her essay entitled “The Technology of Gender,” de Lauretis argues persuasively for what she describes as “the movement in and out of gender as ideological representation.” She writes,

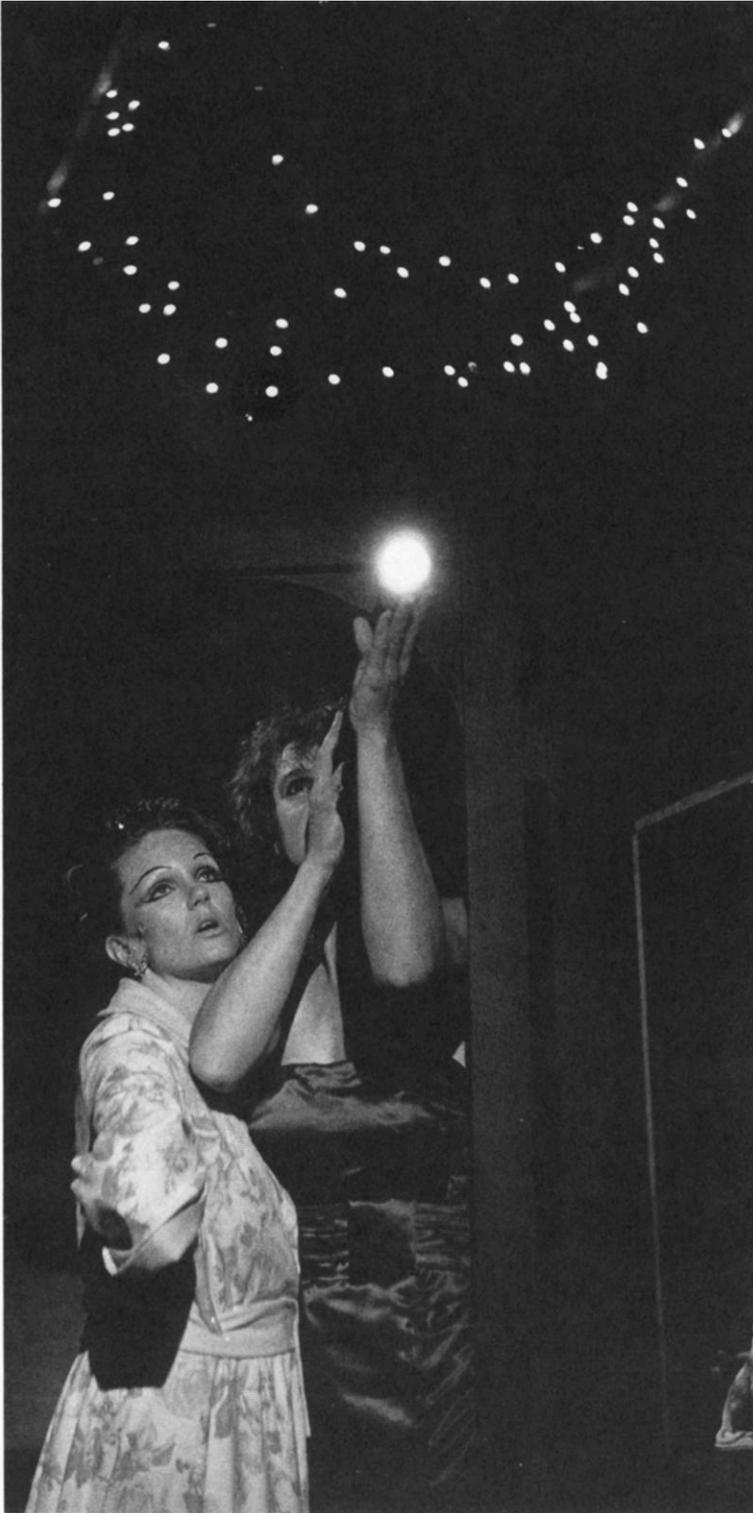
[A] movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses: those other spaces both discursive and social that exist, since feminist practices have (re)constructed them, in the margins (or “between the lines,” or “against the grain”) of hegemonic discourses. [. . .] These two kinds of spaces are neither in opposition to one another nor strung along a chain of signification, but they coexist concurrently and in contradiction. The movement between them, therefore, is not that of a dialectic, of integration, of a combinatory, or of *difference*, but is the tension of contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy (1987:26).

It is from this other space that *Dress Suits* attempts to exist in contradiction with dominant discourse. Especially (although not only) in the seduction scene, played out in terms of lesbian desire, a palpable tension between dominant discourse and lesbian discourse is created, and a voice emerges from under the masquerade: a voice-under that articulates a nonrecuperable discursive space. Little Peter, of course, reappears at the scene’s conclusion, the ever just-around-the-corner phallic principle that, when threatened, surfaces. The two discursive spaces coexist, the tension of the female-body-in-contradiction delineates their respective positions.

The issue of objectification is repeatedly addressed directorially and narratively in scenes that foreground, throw into relief, the meaning-producing mechanisms of the theatrical apparatus. In what could be called “the stargazing scene,” the performers look back through the proscenium opening, creating a kind of reversed voyeurism that—like Shaw’s “Blame” number—addresses concretely the issue of the gaze. Michigan stargazes out the window through a prop that represents a telescope but is not one—it is an unusually long, phallic flashlight turned on the audience. Its beam of light metaphorically projects her gaze and literally traces it visually. Unlike the receptive nature and passive activity a telescope suggests—the gazer receiving images—a flashlight is aggressive, its beam is visible across space and its spot of light hits and reveals its target. In this scene, the target of the gaze is the audience, individual spectators are “spotlighted.” The distance separating performers from spectators is effaced as the “object” of fetishistic gazing assumes an active stance and looks back.

Deeluxe takes the flashlight from Michigan, looks out the window “through” it, and says to Michigan, “Hey! You can see right into my bedroom! You been looking at me! This is proof.” Michigan responds, “I been more than looking. I been watching. That’s looking with a reason.” By virtue of their “looking with a reason,” with lesbian desire, the gaze is reinscribed, detaching the scopophilic drive from its association, or sole alliance with masculinity.

Just as Michigan and Deeluxe, with a beam of light, take the gaze both literally and metaphorically into their own hands, Hughes, Shaw, and Weaver take the theatrical apparatus in hand and, through *Dress Suits to Hire*, make every dimension of it resonate with meaning for lesbians and women. The set, for example, suggests meanings anyone can read: the



3. *Stargazing with a flashlight.* (Photo by Dona Ann McAdams)

walls that separate public (male) from domestic (female) space; the division between the outside world of “social reality” and the interior realm of subjectivity, and so forth. But the physical space, like nearly every other element of the production, also generates meanings that resonate in ways that bear significance especially for lesbians and women—a private experi-

ence in a public, gender-mixed and gender-inscribed, arena. When the characters perform a sweeping, à la '40s-movie-musical dance number in the small space, they nearly smash into the walls and crash into the furniture. It is a very funny number ("hysterically" funny?) during which the room seems smaller, even more claustrophobic. Like the destroyed illusion of backdrop scenery painted in perspective when performers move too close to it, Shaw and Weaver appear too large to be contained by the space. Whether received at a conscious level or not, the experience of this dance number carries the potential for engendering a resonance for lesbians and women that describes the entire project of *Dress Suits to Hire*.

As if to punctuate finally and emphatically the artificiality and meaning-making nature of the theatrical apparatus, the production employs one of theatre's most unconvincing mechanisms—the "deus ex machina" ending. Deeluxe has killed Little Peter. In a hilarious struggle with herself, she strangles him, until her left hand holds nothing but a limp right hand. The two women then sit quietly across from each other, robed as they were at the beginning, when "out of nowhere" a letter falls from above into the room. Michigan picks the envelope up off the floor, looks at it and says, "It's for you." Deeluxe opens it and reads a letter from Little Peter in which he describes the future. It is a sober narrative on the uses to which men will put the tears of women. Deeluxe says, "So that's the future, huh?" Michigan responds, "Don't worry. We'll never see it." As the lights fade out, a certain residue, a certain resonance, hangs in the air.

In the theatre, artists like Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver have consistently pushed at the boundaries of a seemingly monolithic representational system in order to re(image)ine a subject position for lesbians and women. The ultimate aim is social change, but in order to achieve a different position in the social order, it is crucial to reconceptualize this position in the symbolic order.

What does it mean, then, when lesbian theatre is performed in venues outside of lesbian performance spaces? It doesn't necessarily mean assimilation into the mainstream, a virtually automatic appropriation by dominant culture. We need to be aware, however, that even when lesbian artists organize the narrative, visual, and symbolic dimensions of their work to address other lesbians, the theatre as a social technology that includes its spectators is still firmly embedded in the sociosymbolic systems and discourses of dominant culture. *Dress Suits* confronts this challenge and grapples with it.

When signals are crossed in every dimension, increased effort and attention are required on the part of spectators to "read" the performance, scanning and rescanning the production's visual and narrative fields. The additional effort prompted by this kind of performance attempts to dissolve the conventional filters through which spectators usually receive theatre—as a matter of custom, habit, and gender—to suggest new meanings, new ways of seeing, and foreground how those readings and meanings are produced. *Dress Suits to Hire* does not set out to reinvent the wheel, only to puncture and deflate it long enough to create a space in which to imagine lesbians and women differently in the symbolic order.

The production's performance context influenced this project in ways that cannot be ignored. In Ann Arbor where *Dress Suits* was performed in a conventional theatre setting, in the legitimate (and legitimizing) institutional setting of a major university, the work's potential to subvert dominant ideology was seriously undermined. In Milwaukee, where *Dress Suits* was performed in an unconventional, marginal, "illegitimate" theatre space for audiences made up almost entirely of working- and middle-class

lesbians,<sup>12</sup> the exchange of meaning between performance and spectators was arguably different. Still, the struggle to critique objectification and interrupt the processes by which theatrical representation inscribes and prescribes meaning was no less intense. Having experienced the production in several contexts, I could argue with conviction, if not without contradiction, both sides of an ongoing debate: the importance of *Dress Suits* as an instance of lesbian discourse outside of lesbian performance contexts, and the importance of segregating pieces like *Dress Suits* in spaces where lesbians and women are the only spectators.

By mainstream theatre standards, *Dress Suits to Hire* was successful. It received favorable reviews in New York's major newspapers, and Peggy Shaw won an Obie award for her performance of Deeluxe. The political implications of this success for lesbian theatre are more complex and difficult to measure. As I write, a group of WOW artists are making a full-length piece that will open at WOW. At least at this point in their improvisational rehearsal process, they intend to play heterosexual couples. How will such a piece differ from men's camp and Theatre of the Ridiculous? And, extrapolating further, what would it mean for the project of feminism if the next wave of lesbian performance were to enter the mainstream in drag?

## Notes

1. For an excellent introductory history of this performance venue see Solomon (1985), Davy (1985), and Dolan (1985), all published in an issue of TDR devoted to East Village performance.
2. *Dress Suits to Hire* was first produced at the May 1987 Veselka Performance Festival at P.S. 122. In December 1987 it was presented by Split Britches at Women's Interart on West 52nd Street where it played through February 1988.
3. See Witting (1981). Jill Dolan was the first critic to apply Witting's theoretical position to lesbian performance and articulate its implications for the exchange of meanings between performers and spectators (1984). See also Dolan (1988).
4. The distinction between gender as a social and representational construction and its role as a *system* of representation is a vital part of recent feminist debate. See de Lauretis (1987:1-30).
5. I am, admittedly, overstating the case here, relating a butch/femme performative strategy back to lesbian culture, that is, in the way it is played out by some, not all, lesbians. See de Lauretis (1988) for a different theoretical argument and far-reaching analysis of lesbian representation. She refers to an essay by Sue-Ellen Case entitled "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic" unavailable at the time of this writing but forthcoming in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, edited by Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).
6. Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay is so central to an understanding of how voyeurism, fetishism, and scopophilia (pleasure in looking) apply to cinema that nearly every theorist working from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective continues to refer to it, even though new work (including Mulvey's own) rethinks some of her initial positions. See also Mayne (1984) for an analysis of the structures of voyeurism in relation to women as filmmakers and film voyeurs.
7. For a different theoretical approach and in-depth analysis of Rainer's film, see Phelan (1988) and the chapter entitled "Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer" in de Lauretis (1987:107-26). See also Silverman (1984) for an analysis of how filmic strategies, like the voice-over and intertitles, are employed to "denaturalize" the female voice.
8. Doane (1982) discusses, among other things, how distance from the body functions in representational forms, especially distance from the female body on the cinema screen.

9. For an analysis of how the spectator is constructed in Hughes' *Lady Dick* see Davy (1986).
10. In Ann Arbor all the dimensions of material context conspired to undermine *Dress Suits* as an act of resistance. Strategies designed to subvert dominant culture codes tended instead to emphasize them. The critique of objectification was erased and the production became another, albeit different, instance of objectification.  
Feminist theatre scholars Sue-Ellen Case and Elin Diamond were invited by the university to respond to *Dress Suits* and lead a discussion with the audience. One of the issues that surfaced in the discussion following the first performance centered on assimilation: Is lesbian theatre's political import and impact neutralized when it is produced in a major university? Is it assimilated by virtue of its very acceptance in the academy—academe being the storehouse and (re)manufacturer of dominant ideologies and epistemologies? And what are the implications if lesbian performance is perceived as entertainment for predominantly straight audiences? Since some felt the university context radically reshaped the reception of *Dress Suits*, it was suggested that the piece be performed exclusively in lesbian or women-only performance spaces. *Dress Suits* was created by Hughes, Shaw, and Weaver as a way to move lesbian theatre out of the ghetto of lesbian performance spaces. The production circumstances in Ann Arbor made manifest the risks involved in that move.
11. For the original work on masquerade, see Riviere (1986)—her essay was first published in 1929.
12. The only publicity for *Dress Suits*' three performances in Milwaukee was a promotional mailing to approximately 1,700 names on the list of a local organization that produces women's music concerts, an annual Kate Clinton (a lesbian stand-up comedian) show, dances, and other events for the lesbian community. The piece was performed in a warehouse that had been converted into a makeshift theatre by a local performing group. Because this group was using the theatre part of the warehouse, *Dress Suits* was mounted in the large "lobby" area of the space—literally on the margins of an already marginal space.

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