

# *The Alcestis Project: Split Britches at Hampshire College*

Rhonda Blair

*The piece which follows explores a particular project. Split Britches' residency at Hampshire College, from three vantage points. In the first section, Rhonda Blair, faculty member in the Hampshire Theater Program, and author of the grant which funded the Company's extended residency at Hampshire, discusses her experience of working with her students and the Company on The Alcestis Project. The second section is an edited interview with Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw and Deb Margolin and myself in which the members of Split Britches reflect on their experience of the residency and discuss their process of working with the students. The final section is the "text" of a culminating "performance," Deb invited commencement address to the students of Hampshire at the end of the academic year in which the residency took place (1989-1990). As this issue of Women and Performance goes to press, Split Britches is off to do another residency at the University of Hawaii.*  
—Lisa Merrill

In 1988 the Hampshire College Theater Program received a grant from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities to support an extended residency by the Split Britches Company in Fall 1989. Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw, Deb Margolin and I had talked about the possibilities of such a residency for years. We knew that the emphasis would be on feminism and teaching students Split Britches' techniques of theatre-making and that the Company would develop a new work in collaboration with our students. We also decided that an already established text would provide a starting point for the eventual production. The details of how we at Hampshire arrived first at using the Greeks, then finally selected Euripides' *Alcestis*, are now a murky memory, but I know it had something to do with being fascinated with the ambiguities and problems of Euripides' play, as well as wanting to write a grant which would appeal to a state council. *Alcestis* allowed us to look at women's erasure within the home and society, women's silencing, and a literal self-sacrifice which a woman makes to save her husband. I felt a resonance

between Alcestis' position and that of women in situation comedies of the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as Donna Reed, and suggested this to Split Britches as a path they might pursue. Three planning sessions occurred before the residency: a brief one in New York in January 1989 with me and the Company; a week-long planning session at Hampshire in May, which included some student workshops; and a week in late August, again at Hampshire, with the company, two theater faculty, a staff director and four undergraduate teaching assistants. At this last meeting we completed the final planning for the feminist theater course and the production itself. The residency lasted from the beginning of October until mid-November. Out of this combination of elements, *Honey, I'm Hume: The Alcestis Story*, a chaotic, funny moving piece was born. We laughed a great deal along the way, and the lives of many of us were powerfully affected and even transformed.

Split Britches' pedagogy *seems* to begin with their love of making theater, a refusal to compartmentalize their lives (e.g., into "life" and "work"), a strong commitment to integrity and engagement, and massive amounts of acceptance, tolerance, and flexibility. I have rarely seen teachers focus with such clarity on each individual with whom they are working; in engaging a student, Peggy, Lois and Deb were keenly interested in knowing who that student was and eliciting what mattered to her or him in doing this work. The emphasis was not on getting a particular show up or teaching students to have technically polished skills, but on class and rehearsal as exploration<sup>^</sup>-of an issue and of the self. A goal throughout was to get students to expand their vision of themselves and their ability to accept difference. The inclusiveness was such that everyone who wanted to be in the show was in the show—everyone was acceptable. Students were constantly, gently, often humorously challenged to question assumptions they may have had about what "theater" is, what constitutes good "theater," about gender, and their own sexual preferences and feelings about sexuality. They were never allowed to denigrate a fellow student with whom they disagreed (and the range of attitudes among this group of approximately thirty students was very broad, ranging from radical feminists to those fearful of accepting feminism at all). I am still trying to figure out how Lois read the group so well as she directed it, executing a delicate balancing act of pushing to get a task done and knowing when to back off and give the students a break. She knew when it was important to forge ahead and when it was important just to stop and talk. Under Split Britches' guidance a huge

amount of material was generated in the first two-thirds of the process, through improvisation and talk. Though much of what was generated was thrown out in the final scripting, experimentation and play continued until very late in the process. Though Deb, Lois, and Peggy were firmly in control of shaping the material, its generation was a genuinely collaborative effort with the students. Each student literally had a part in the script—a speech, a moment, a scene—which had come from their personal, improvisational efforts. As a result of all this, a large, diverse group of students was consistently invested in the show and its journey. I have never seen a group of students grow so much intellectually and socially, in ways in which it really matters, as a result of having participated in a particular production.

My own teaching grew as a result of this experience. It gave me a truer, less qualified understanding of collaboration and dialectic in the pedagogic process. This process, in fact, brought many principles of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* into action. Split Britches' ability to be open to and engage the individual student was a model of Freire's discussion of what it means to be a Teacher/Student, working with Student/Teachers<sup>1</sup>. It was also an object lesson in how to set appropriate boundaries as a director/teacher, articulating a clear set of goals, creating a safe space for exploration and disclosure, and then getting out of the way. My sense of time and its rightful use in the production (and teaching) process was radically altered; I saw the value of slowing down to be as present as possible to the students with whom I am working, of being more truly in the moment with the people involved, rather than being single-mindedly concerned about the task at hand or a particular outcome in terms of product. In fact, I have come to appreciate ambiguity and open-mindedness strongly in terms of "product"; it is more fun to work with students and let the product grow from all of us. I still have specific strategies, values, and techniques in a class or production, but I am much less attached to the classwork or production being an extension of my vision alone. In short, the work feels much more like a genuinely mutual exploration. This has meant giving up a certain amount of (usually illusory) control, but this increases the pleasure of the work.

An additional pleasure for the faculty members involved in a project such as this is working with guest artists who inject a fresh perspective and feelings of regeneration and rejuvenation into the routine of a program or department. More important, the *Alcestis* project can serve as a

model for what "good" college or university theater can be. It is not about trying to duplicate some commercial or regional theater standard, but about making particular theater pieces with particular (young) people in a way that consciously includes and fosters their personal and social development. At the center of this project is a celebratory, unapologetic feminism. Students can explore the ways they have been shaped by gender codes and rules and ultimately confront their own as well as the world's sexism and homophobia. In short, *Split Britches* engaged us in more honest, brave, and playfully outrageous work than many of us can do easily on our own.

It was a true gift to have Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw and Deborah Margolin with us that autumn.

### *Notes*

1. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1990): 57-75