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Aesthetics of Oya in Reading, Casting, and Staging Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*

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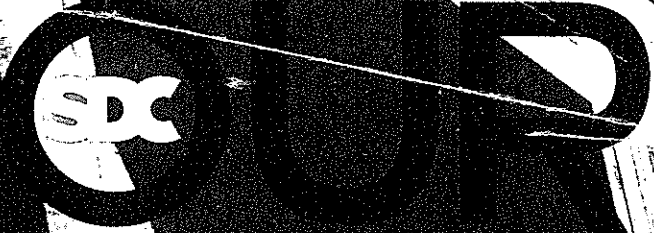


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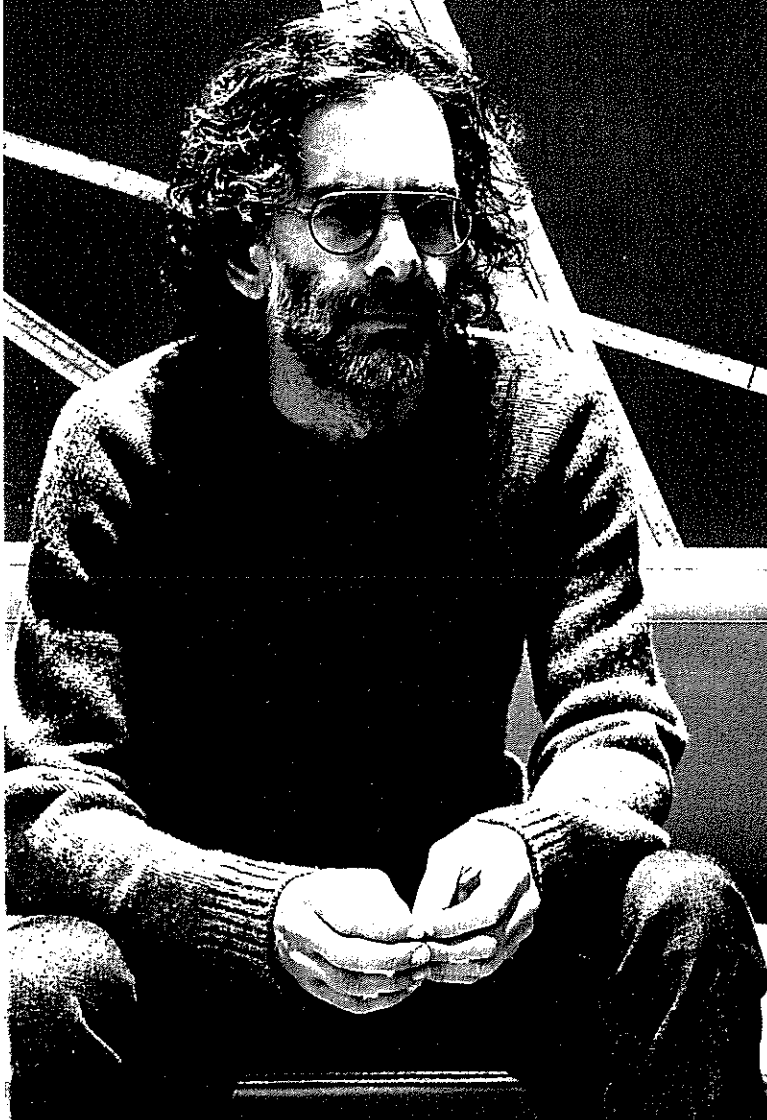
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SPRING 2



INTEREST IN EXTREMES

MIXED SWIMMING

Jackson Gay

JOYFUL HELL

Niegel Smith + Taylor Mac

**WORKING FROM
COURAGE**

Steve Cosson

AND

SOCIETY

CULTURE WARS

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Aesthetics of Oya in Reading, Casting, and Staging Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*

BY OMIYEMI (ARTISIA GREEN)

COVER Daniel Fish + Donald Byrd
PHOTO Francis Hills Photography

Artistic Director: Daniel Fish
Produced by: Donald Byrd
Directed by: Nigel Smith
Photo: Luz Lauren

Directors are often in a unique position when staging a “canonical” work; we may feel a need to be attentive to the play’s history and the playwright’s intentions, but are also charged with re-seeing the play through lenses that will help contemporary audiences encounter it in new ways. Director **Ivo van Hove** has recently gained renown for his directing of such American classics as Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge* (2014) and *The Crucible* (2016). In this issue of the Peer-Reviewed Section, **Omiyemi (Artisia Green)** offers a new framing of a modern American classic: *The Children’s Hour* by Lillian Hellman. While acknowledging the play’s problematic elements, Omiyemi uniquely employs an African spiritual lens in her direction. Using the aesthetics of the Yoruba *Oya*, a spirit of wind and storms, death and rebirth, the author prompts audiences to consider elements of plot and character in *The Children’s Hour* through lenses that pose death as rebirth and offer new perspectives on characters’ behavior. Coupled with close comparisons of source material and Hellman’s revisions of the play, Omiyemi’s fresh direction of the play follows Hellman’s initial aims of repentance through revision with this controversial classic.

INTRODUCED + EDITED BY EMILY A. ROLLIE + ANN M. SHANAHAN

AESTHETICS OF OYA IN READING, CASTING, AND STAGING LILLIAN HELLMAN’S *THE CHILDREN’S HOUR*

BY OMIYEMI (ARTISIA GREEN), WILLIAM & MARY

“What if we were to stand on our heads and assume that our American culture is African-rooted, so that the European elements could be regarded from an Africanist perspective?”

—Brenda Gottschild

My direction is about revealing the invisible forces that give meaning to our realities. I listen for different rhythms and, through my scholarly and creative praxis, turn up the volume on those tonal shifts—a play’s interior values, its phantom limbs, its life force, its spiritual exposition, its mythic resonances. These tonal shifts are as the beat of the drum: the driving impulse of the work. Making this impulse clear for the audience is my responsibility as an artist, for I agree with James Baldwin’s assertion in “The Creative Process:”

Society must accept some things as real; but [they] must always know that a visible reality hides a deeper one and that all our action and achievement rest on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and [she] must let us know, there is nothing stable under heaven. (670)

As an Ifá-Òriṣà priest, I source a number of devices from this spiritual tradition to use as black dramaturgical and performance strategies. Paul Carter Harrison states, “The truest barometer of black experience is *how* the story is told” (248). Consequently, I implemented aesthetics of *Oya*—the deity of change and transformation from the Yorùbá Òriṣà pantheon—to invite in or tease out, as Brenda Gottschild notes above, the “Africanist perspective” in directing Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* (1934).¹

Hellman’s first play, *The Children’s Hour*, was dubbed “The Thunderbolt of Broadway”; it ran for 691 performances, and brought Hellman, virtually unknown at this point, instant recognition. The story is an adapted from “Closed Doors, or The Great Drumsheugh Case,” a chapter from William Routhead’s book *Bad Companions*

(1930). “Closed Doors” was a true crime story about a girls’ school in Edinburgh, Scotland, forced to close because its owners, Jane Pirie and Marianne Woods, were said to be lesbians, in a rumor spread by one of the students, Jane Cumming. *The Children’s Hour* tells the story of two hard-working college friends, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright, who purchase a farm and open a boarding school for girls. Their business and professional lives are ruined when one of their nine pupils, Mary Tilford, tells her grandmother, Mrs. Tilford, that she saw the two women kissing (Fig. 1). A smear campaign ensues, students are withdrawn, and the school is forced to close. Martha and Karen file libel charges against Mrs. Tilford. However, they lose the case and are convicted of having “sinful sexual knowledge” of each other (1953, 61; Fig. 2). After Karen’s fiancé leaves her, Martha realizes for the first time, and admits her sexual love for Karen, confessing, “Maybe I love you *that way*. The way they said I loved you” (1953, 68). In a disturbing ending, which scholars such as Jill Dolan have deservedly criticized for inscribing tropes of self-harm by lesbians and gay men,² Martha commits suicide. Immediately following, Mrs. Tilford arrives to acknowledge to a bereft Karen that the entire case was based on a false accusation.

The Children’s Hour is a problematic text. Beyond the injurious ending and the potential for a hysterical personification of Martha in the melodramatic overtones of the last scene (amplified in William Wyler’s 1961 film version), Mary’s characterization lacks nuance and she is totally absent from the play’s ending. Inspired by my own artistic sensibilities and by Brenda Gottschild’s words in the epigraph, I sought to turn the text on its head, and re-imagine Hellman’s take

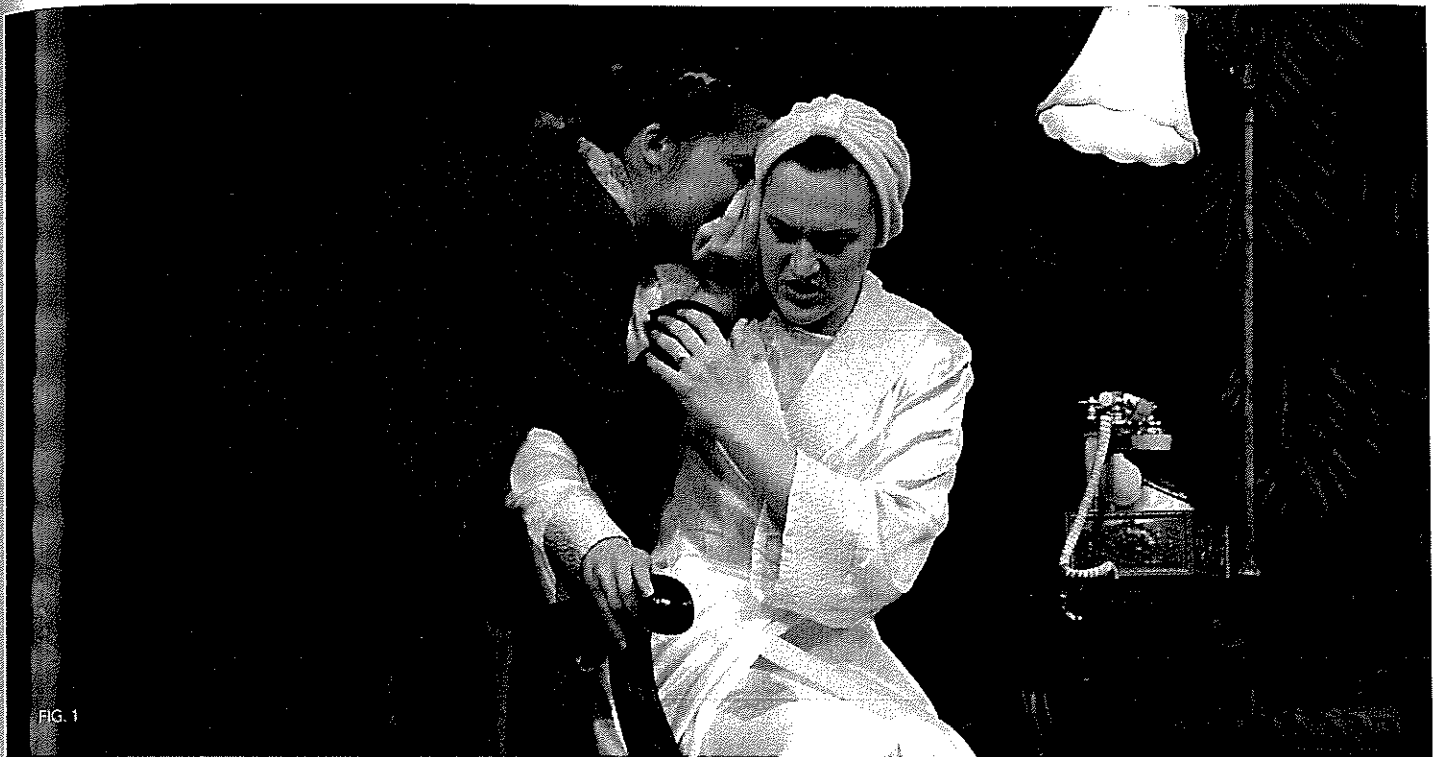


FIG. 1
 Fig. 1. Act II: Anna Boustany (Mary) and Hannah Brown (Mrs. Tilford); Set Design: Matthew Allar, Lighting Design: Steve Holliday, Costumes: Jenn Baker. PHOTO ©Samuel Flint

on events in a fictional New England community from an Africanist perspective. While such a perspective would not change the harmful trope of the end, an Africanist lens would help me and student-actors motivate Mary's behavior and serve to reframe Martha's death in an emancipatory fashion. This approach, encouraged by Hellman's own revisionist dramaturgy, enabled students and audiences to "expand the limits of [their] historical and cultural imagination"—not only to engage conceptions from Hellman's earlier work for a holistic understanding of the play, but also to look deeply at the "latent [spiritual] qualities" of the text (Danto 98).

In an interview with Harry Gilroy, reprinted in the 1953 Dramatists Play Service edition, Hellman disclosed that "she had a great temptation to rewrite" *The Children's Hour* as she was a "different person with a whole different series of emotions" (5). Revisionism is also the subject of one of her memoirs, *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits* (1973), a compilation of essay portraits about significant figures in her life. The title, "pentimento," an Italian word which means "repentance," could serve as "a metaphor for her own remorse in repressing her bisexual tendencies" (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 97), but also as a means of processing "the half-remembered, the half-observed, the half-understood" moments in her childhood (*Four Plays*, viii). Hellman describes the title's significance, writing:

Old paint on a canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called pentimento because the painter "repented," changed [her] mind. Perhaps it would be well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again. (*Three*, 309)

There are five copyright protections noted in the Dramatists acting edition of *The Children's Hour*. Thus, as Hellman acquiesced to self-evaluation, to which she admitted paying only "polite lip-service" (*Four Plays*, viii), and as her political and perhaps sexual

consciousnesses evolved, she continued to see and re-see her "old conception" in new ways. In the introduction to *Four Plays*, she writes:

It took a year and a half of stumbling stubbornness to do [*The Children's Hour*]. I remembered . . . how many times I tore it up, how many characters I took out and put back and took out again; how I reached back into my own childhood and found the day I finished M.I. De Maupin; the day I faked a heart attack; the day I saw an arm get twisted. . . . There are many things wrong with *The Children's Hour*. (Even with my new clarity I have not seen them all, which is just as well, and better for my health.) (viii)

In the eighteen years between the opening of *The Children's Hour* at Maxine Elliott's Theatre in 1934 and its 1952 reprisal at the Coronet Theatre, Hellman "repented" in her dramaturgy. She dropped Evelyn's speech pathology, gave Peggy career aspirations to be a veterinarian as opposed to a light-keeper's wife, and slimmed down Rosalie, described as "fattish" in the earliest version of the text. Hellman's adjustments to characterization, coupled with alterations to racial undertones and literary references, informed my casting.

Distinctions between the 1934 and 1952 texts around the issue of race emboldened me to think about destabilizing expectations around assumed constructions of whiteness in the work. In both the 1934 and 1952 manuscripts, out of the need to make sense of Mary's troublesome behavior, Martha asks Joe about his family; Joe is Mrs. Tilford's nephew and first cousin to Mary's deceased father. Martha asks, "Any idiots in your family, Joe? Any inbreeding?" (1942, 22; 1953, 23). In the 1934 text Joe responds, "Don't blame her [Mary] on me. It's another side of the family." Joe references Mary's family on her mother's side, "You can look at Aunt Amelia and tell: old New England stock, never married out of Boston, still thinks honor is honor and dinner's at eight thirty. Yes ma'am, we're a proud old breed" (19). In the 1952 text, Hellman repents, and edits this line to simply read, "Don't blame her on me. It's another side of the family" (23). Hellman leaves reference to the Boston pedigree entirely unaddressed in all subsequent versions of the play.

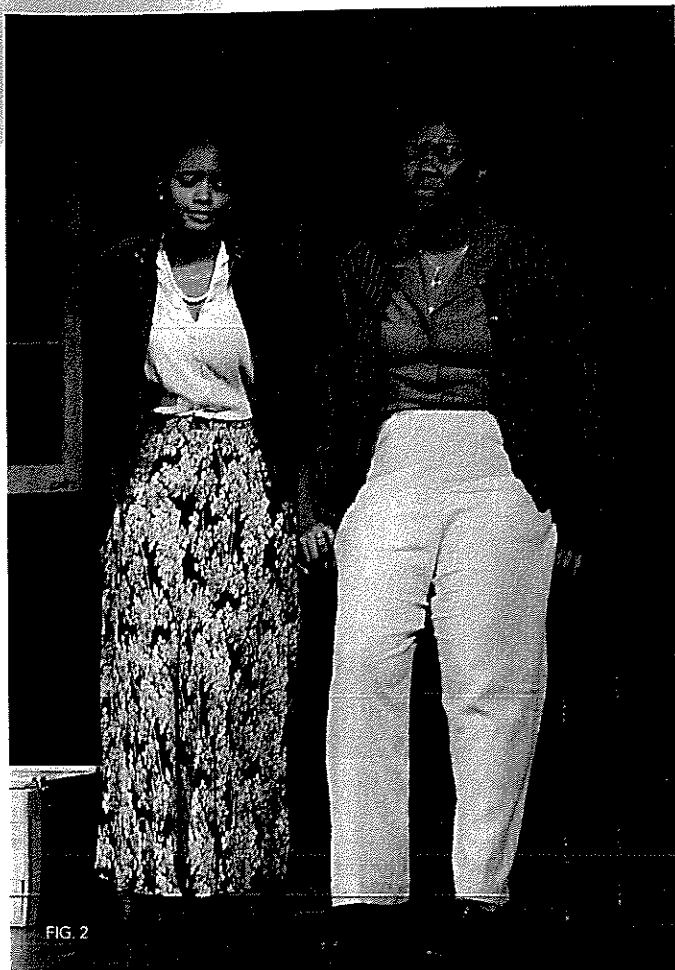


FIG. 2

Fig. 2. Act III: Divinity Summers (Karen) and Neonna Ferebee (Martha); Set Design: Matthew Allar, Lighting Design: Steve Holliday, Costumes: Jenn Baker. PHOTO ©Samuel Flint

However, Mikko Tuhkanen's "Breeding (and) Reading: Lesbian Knowledge, Eugenic Discipline, and *The Children's Hour*" provided additional clues that contextualize Martha and Joe's vague but charged comments. In the original story, "Closed Doors," Jane Cummings is a biracial child, born in India of an unmarried Indian mother and Scottish father, recently deceased. According to Tuhkanen, because Cummings denied having read about "lesbian knowledge" and the crime was "so infamous, that it never was before heard of in this country," Pirie and Woods suggested that it was in Cummings's country of birth, described as "the pollutions of the heathen world," that she had allegedly learned of this "deviant knowledge" (Tuhkanen 1005-6). In the 1934 text, Mary's ethnic background is unclear, and, unlike Cummings, she does learn of "lesbian knowledge" from an illicit book. However, through Martha's and Joe's comments, Hellman suggests, much like Pirie and Woods, that there is something about Mary's maternal genealogy that exists outside of the "proud, old, [Tilford] breed"—a difference that could perhaps explain her social difficulties.

Hellman's revisions to lines which she says "felt too literary" further informed my casting choices as well as my directorial approach (Gilroy 4). For example, the 1934 text opens with the young women in sewing and elocution classes. Some of the students conjugate Latin. There are literary references to poet Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man" and dramatist Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Other students read from classics such as Marcus Cicero's *Cataline Orations* and William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The opening lines are spoken by Peggy reciting Portia's speech about the virtues of mercy:

It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes the throned monarch
better than his crown; his scepter shows the force of temporal
power, the attribute to awe and majesty, wherein doth sit the
dread and fear of kings; but mercy is above... (5)

In the 1952 version, Hellman eliminates the references to authors Pope and Ibsen, and instead of reciting Portia, Peggy reads Cleopatra from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*:

I hear him mock the luck of Caesar, which the Gods give men
to excuse their after wrath: Husband, I come. Now to that name
my courage prove my title. I am fire, and air; my other elements
I give to baser life. So have you done? Come then, and take the
last warmth of my lips. Farewell, kind Charmian; Iras farewell. (3)

As a director who desires to reaffirm life and liberation in their work, I considered that Hellman's insertion of *Antony and Cleopatra* might reflect her desire to cast a somewhat emancipatory light on the tragedy of Martha's death in Act III. In Shakespeare's work, Cleopatra, refusing to succumb to being a trophy or spectacle of the Roman Empire, and inspired by a superhuman vision (she is "fire and air"), approaches her grave with resolution and conviction, by her own hand. In this context, Martha's suicide could be read similarly as an act of liberation and love through which she could both free herself from homophobia (externalized and internalized) and gesture to her adoration for Karen. Martha's self-destruction could free them both from being lesbian spectacles and offer Karen the possibility of living the life she previously desired—being a wife to Joe and a mother to any children produced of their union—should she still desire these goals. Perhaps Hellman's revisioning of the opening quote was a way for her to frame Martha's problematic death in a more empowering way? Whether Hellman consciously reframed Martha's death as liberatory, by opening the play with Cleopatra's quote or not, this was certainly intentioned in my directorial approach. My re-envisioning was similar to the redressive practice of ex-slaves who re-envisioned the memory of suicidal practices during North American enslavement through flying African folklore, as in the example below (Snyder, 43, 59):

I have heard of them people. . . . My mother used to tell me about them when we sat in this city market selling vegetables and fruit. She say that there was a man and his wife and they got fooled aboard a slave ship. First thing they know they was sold to a planter on St. Helena. So one day when all the slaves was together, this man and his wife say, "We going back home, goodie bye, goodie bye," and just like a bird they flew out of sight. (Carrie Hamilton qtd in Snyder, 47-48)

While the conditions which fostered suicide within the context of North American slavery vary, the performance of suicide as an "honorable escape," a "form of defiance," or "a source of spiritual relief" from oppression and inhumanity were understandings I applied to my reading of both Cleopatra's and Martha's suicides. My staging of the problematic tragedy was grounded in the courage conveyed by Cleopatra and the resolve of those who committed acts of self-murder, mythologized through flying African folklore. After contextualizing Martha's attitude in her final moments with this lens, I instructed the actress to look at Karen with longing, kiss her forehead,³ and walk towards her desk, grab and smell the purple scylla (referenced in the text), and then exit without looking back. While the staging did not resolve the rightful critique of the trope of suicide for LGBTQ+ characters, I aimed to allay clichéd executions of the deeply troubling event by adding a forthright moment of intimacy between the two women, coupled with a decisive, emancipatory tone to Martha's departure.

Although unpacking the rationale behind the evolution of Hellman's acts of repentance and revision is outside the scope of this discussion, these traces of her "original lines" from her "old conception" influenced my interpretation of her "later choice[s]" and/or suppressions in the 1952 text. Dramaturgically, the 1934 text, coupled with an understanding of elements of "Closed Doors," enriched my understanding of Mary, who is otherwise one-dimensional. Hellman describes Mary as "malicious," "neurotic," "sly," and "a bad character" (Gilroy 4). However, neither version of *The Children's Hour* offers clues on the roots of her sinister conduct, and given that she is removed from the third act, Hellman offers Mary no opportunity for redemption. Thus, clarifying the conditions of Mary's childhood and potential impulses for her destructive behavior, as well as grappling with the unsettling resolution which Hellman opines "should have ended with Martha's suicide" (*Four Plays*, viii), were two key areas for me to consider as I prepared to direct the play.

The production I directed ran in the fall of 2018 for four performances in the Kimble Theatre at William & Mary.⁴ The play was selected in honor of the 100th year of co-education at William & Mary and to support the COLL 300 course theme, "Bodies that Matter." I attended to both the 1934 and 1952 versions of the play as well as the true account upon which Hellman based her work. In my revisionist reading, Mary was a biracial child of European/Middle Eastern descent, sent to New England to live with her grandmother. Grieving the death of her favorite son, Mrs. Tilford overindulges his progeny, ultimately creating a manipulative, anti-social child, some of whose troublesome antics could be rooted in maternal separation anxiety.

As director, I had three goals for the production. One, I would build an inclusive ensemble, challenging perceptions around ability, color, gender expression, physical type, and sexual orientation in order to explore how consideration of these signifiers in casting could make the work resonant in our present moment. Two, I would demonstrate that Black Theatre is a dramaturgical and/or performative methodology grounded within an Africanist ethos. Three, I sought to illuminate the spiritual forces at play in order to help us understand the motivations for Mary's anti-social behavior and, despite the drastic consequences of her deceit, offer her, a mere child, a chance at redemption.

A major theme of *The Children's Hour* is the idea of unearthing or making way for truth to emerge. Hence, I tapped into the mythic conscious and energy of Oya, one of the 400 plus one òrìṣà within the Ifá-Òrìṣà tradition of Southwestern Nigeria.⁵ Individuals with a disposition similar to Oya have the power, as signified through the mask often seen in Oya portraiture or shrines, to see through the deception in others, for just like the wind, Oya uncovers the truth (Jones). Martha brings the idea of Mary and Oya's perceptive ability directly into focus when she remarks to Karen, "Suddenly a little girl gets bored and tells a lie—and there, that night, you see it for the first time, and you say it yourself, did she see it, did she sense it—? She found the lie with the ounce of truth" (1953, 69).

In the worldview of the Yorùbá, the òrìṣà are defined as select heads or manifestations of the Divine in nature. Each òrìṣà has their own distinguishing attributes and aesthetics (i.e. numbers, associative animals, foods, tools through which they are invoked), praise names, songs, mythology, and metaphysical principles. In her anthropomorphized and gendered state, Oya is known as a hunter-warrior. She, whose name means "she tore," is the òrìṣà of change and transformation. Her energy manifests as air in motion. It can be seen in rustling leaves, escalating winds—tornadoes and cyclones—and it moves through rainstorms, fire, and earthquakes. Oya guards thresholds, edges, borders, the transformation of things from one state to another, and "radical shifts of being" (Gleason 31). She is

considered the patron of the marketplace (i.e., earth, commerce, business, bartering) because of its transitory and transactive nature.

A generative energy, a praise name for Oya is "Yansan," which means the "Mother of Nine." In the lore surrounding Oya, nine is connected to the nine estuaries which lead to the Niger River, the waterway she is associated with in Nigeria. Nine, represented through her nine different colored skirts, may also represent each of her progeny: the dark mother (black); the blood mother (red); the golden mother (orange); the sun, a "shield" to blind the enemy (yellow); the weaver woman (green); the hurricane (blue); lightning (indigo); the crone (purple); and the wind or "dancer in the flame" (silver) (Jones). Within the Ifá-Òrìṣà tradition, it is believed that it is Oya's energy which escorts humanity into the world as individuals take their first breath (emi) upon emerging from the aquatic environment of their mother's womb. Oya is also thought to usher the deceased away from the earth as they exhale for the last time. As death is a state of change and transformation, Oya is connected to the ancestors (Egún). They are her children. From a Ki-Kongo perspective, when one dies or is in the ancestral realm—a site of "perdurance"—they are stronger (Thompson, 142). This philosophical aesthetic of Oya, the notion of her as a hub to a repository of endurance and permanence in immortality, further buoyed my emancipatory reframing of Martha's suicide. She only dies physically. However, in her death her spirit is stronger, immortal, and perhaps freer—like unconstrained "fire and air"—in her elevation.

In *Oya: In Praise of an African Goddess*, author Judith Gleason describes her as "an agent of purification" (46). She clears the air with her twirling irùkè (whisk) and skirts, whipping up storms that cause a ventilating action on her path and in immediate surroundings (46, 70). The sweeping/cleansing motion, or destruction that is associated with her circulative energy, allows for the birth of something new.

This notion of intense movement or chaotic flow of energy extends to humanity. According to Philip Neimark's *The Way of the Orisa*, individuals whose personalities and energy are similar to Oya may have been "difficult" as children (130). He writes further:

Omo Oya are volatile in nature. The energy of this orisa simply cannot be suppressed for any significant length of time. When male or female Oyas are angered, they will express it in dramatic and often tornadic style. They are often called, "the rushing wind that tears down trees from the top." As children they will be difficult to control, insisting upon their own tastes and setting their own agendas. Their tantrums will spring full blown from seemingly innocuous situations, and calming them will be harder than expected. (130-1)

From skipping class to walk in Conway's cornfield to feigning heart pain, breaking lover's gifts on Karen's desk, and "expertly" twisting the arms of her classmates as well as the heart of her grandmother, *The Children's Hour* is rife with examples of Mary's use of lies, fear, manipulation, guilt, and violence to control those around her rather than be controlled by them or incidences of following her own plan (1953, 31).

In my production of *The Children's Hour*, aesthetics of Oya were implemented in four key areas: set design, casting, character study, and transitions.⁶

SET DESIGN

Aesthetics of Oya were implemented within the set design. The energy of Oya was visually suggested through the nine windows suspended in the air (Fig. 3). These windows also served as the farmhouse/schoolhouse wall. At times, the panels of the windows resembled



FIG. 3

Fig. 3. Act I: Brennan McCray (Rosalie), Erin McKeown (Evelyn), Veronica Silva (Catherine), Andi Nealon (Lois), and Lilly Greenwald (Peggy); Set Design: Matthew Allar, Lighting Design: Steve Holliday, Costumes: Jenn Baker. PHOTO ©Samuel Flint

blockages—the social constraints felt by Martha and Karen who are, in a sense, imprisoned by both the judicial system and the community’s dehumanizing perception. The color palette (with some intentional exceptions), subtly reinforced the mercurial nature of *Oya* through degrees of red, muted and dark mahogany, purple, and gray, while simultaneously complementing the colors of the performance venue.

CASTING

Riffing on the rainbow symbolism evoked through *Oya*’s nine different colored skirts and the rainbow’s association with the LGBTQIA+ community, I cast a transcultural ensemble, rich in sexual, gender, and ethnic identities, body types, neurodiversity, and varying levels of acting experience (Fig. 4). I fully disclosed my casting politics in the audition form, stating, “I wish to build an inclusive ensemble with intentional regard for challenging perception around ability, color, gender expression, physical type, and sexual orientation.” Being transparent about my own politics gave students space to declare their own. In the space offered for concerns, questions, and/or comments, many students disclosed their sexual identity:

“I’m lesbian, but I have only come out to a few friends. I don’t mind if the production team know[s] my sexual orientation, but other than that I hope to keep it a secret.”

— “As a lesbian, I’m extremely interested to see how we bring this production into the 21st century, especially considering rising controversy surrounding the ‘bury your gays’ trope in [the] media.”

Others shared larger aspirational aims on shifting the cultural climate within the department and the world beyond William & Mary:

“I would appreciate the opportunity to contribute to . . . the emphasis on diversity.”

“Inclusivity, love [and] acceptance are what our country lacks and play a huge part in *The Children’s Hour* and the end of the show. I’m so interested in this exploration.”

Some actors were interested in a nuanced form of storytelling that made space for visible and non-visible signifiers such as physical appearance and heritage, respectively:

“It would be refreshing to see the challenges of intersectionality at play for a Black queer woman should a Black woman be cast for the role of one of the [leads].”

“I am also of Middle Eastern descent, which is not obvious when looking at me and when people find out, their idea of me is changed.”

My informed approach to creating a “welcome table” yielded a production that looked like any classroom at William & Mary and held space for students who identified with the play’s subject matter. In this way, my casting mirrored Hellman’s dramaturgy. She used her characters (i.e., Martha, Mary, Julia) as a means of expressing parts of her identities and getting in touch with “the queer aspects of her personality” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 97). Thus, our production of *The Children’s Hour* was no longer just the story of Hellman’s characters; it became a site for collective story making.

In keeping with the goal of staging the play with an “Africanist perspective,” I fully embraced the ethnicity of the actors who played Martha, Karen, Mrs. Mortar, and Agatha. For example, their natural

hair remained in its natural state, styled according to the character's personality, not White American beauty standards of the 1930s. Mrs. Mortar's hair was two-strand twisted in small sections, a popular protective style of 21st-century Black women, but pinned into an up-do to reflect her age, conventional nature, and desire for order. Martha's hair was also two-strand twisted, but in much larger sections. As her hair was shorter, her twists created a halo of distinctiveness that, like her sexual preference, flew in the face of societal norms. Relatedly, the twisted hair evoked the sense of movement conveyed through contorted and intertwined air in artistic renderings of Oya.

ACTING METHODOLOGY

Student actors utilized orisha archetypes to build their characters. For example, the student portraying Mary used aesthetic attributes of Oya as a performance strategy. Mary moves as a tornado through the play, tearing down everything in her path. However, some truth emerges from this destructive behavior, for although the women did not have "sexual knowledge of one another," Martha reveals that she did love Karen:

I've been telling myself that since the night we heard the child say it. I lie in bed night after night praying that it isn't true. But I know about it now. It's there. I don't know how. I don't know why. But I did love you. I do love you. I resented your marriage; maybe because I wanted you all these years; I couldn't call it by a name but maybe it's been there ever since I first knew you . . . I never loved a man—I never knew why before. (1953, 69)

According to Harrison, "Without the benefit of a forceful, spiritually expressive character, the dramatization of black experience becomes frozen in sociological analysis" (321). Thus, understanding the function of Oya clarified the actor's objectives, kept her performance clear of emotive clutter, and established a rhythm or pacing within the show which, like the wind, escalated towards the climax. Rather than playing an adolescent miscreant, the actress conveyed the larger ideas and aims of Oya as a driving impulse.

TRANSITIONS

As transitions between acts of a play are also within Oya's domain, I extended the idea of change and transformation through the scenic changes, evoking squall-like movement between the three acts. The

cast became the violent gust of wind as they rolled up, off, or on pieces of the set. Each transition was set to purple lighting (Fig. 2) and thematically related, anachronistic music, which further invoked Oya's energy.⁷ At the end of Act I, Mary runs away from the school to resist punishment. Riffing on the idea of wild winds, I bridged Acts I and II with The Temptations' "Runaway Child, Running Wild" from their 1969 LP *Cloud Nine*. Then, the windy-thunderstorm prelude of The Dramatics' "In the Rain" bridged Acts II and III, bringing the weather elements Hellman calls for in Act III. As the stage technicians opened the stage curtains differentiating the school from Mrs. Tilford's home, they billowed, heightening the idea of a squall. Bilal's "Butterfly" (featuring Robert Glasper) served as the bookend to Act III, reinforcing the metamorphic ideas associated with Oya and offering Mary the moral redemption I felt the text lacked, but that is central in Black dramaturgy (Harrison 247). The song—specifically the lyrics—were "the light" in the darkness which "illuminate[d] [Mary's] path toward epiphany" (247). Oya's association with life and death or change and transformation was used to bring Mary back into the life of the play and offer her a chance at redemption. Despite the deep ruptures that Mary's actions caused in the community, I wanted the audience to see that she, like the energy of Oya through the air we breathe, was still "inside life." By including Mary within the life of the ending, I was able to, as scholar Victor Leo Walker says, "reaffirm the life force of the community by engaging the community in an experience that reinforces the collective worldview in which the natural rhythms and cosmic balances of the community, despite periodic disruptions, are in harmony" (14).

While I made new interpretations, protecting the integrity of Hellman's work was important. Hence, I was limited in what I could offer Mary and Karen at the end. All I could suggest was that they had the opportunity to choose harmony. Therefore, in Act III of my production, Mary became a visible but silent presence. Following the motif of eavesdropping that Hellman establishes in Act I, in my re-visioning, Mary accompanied her grandmother to the Dobie-Wright farmhouse. Curious about what was taking Mrs. Tilford so long, she peeks through the window, just at the moment Karen tells Mrs. Tilford that Martha has committed suicide (Fig. 5). She remains there for the rest of the scene and Karen catches a glimpse of her after Mrs. Tilford's exit. The two of them fix on one another, conflicted, but Mary's is the only face the audience could see. The audience watched her move through a

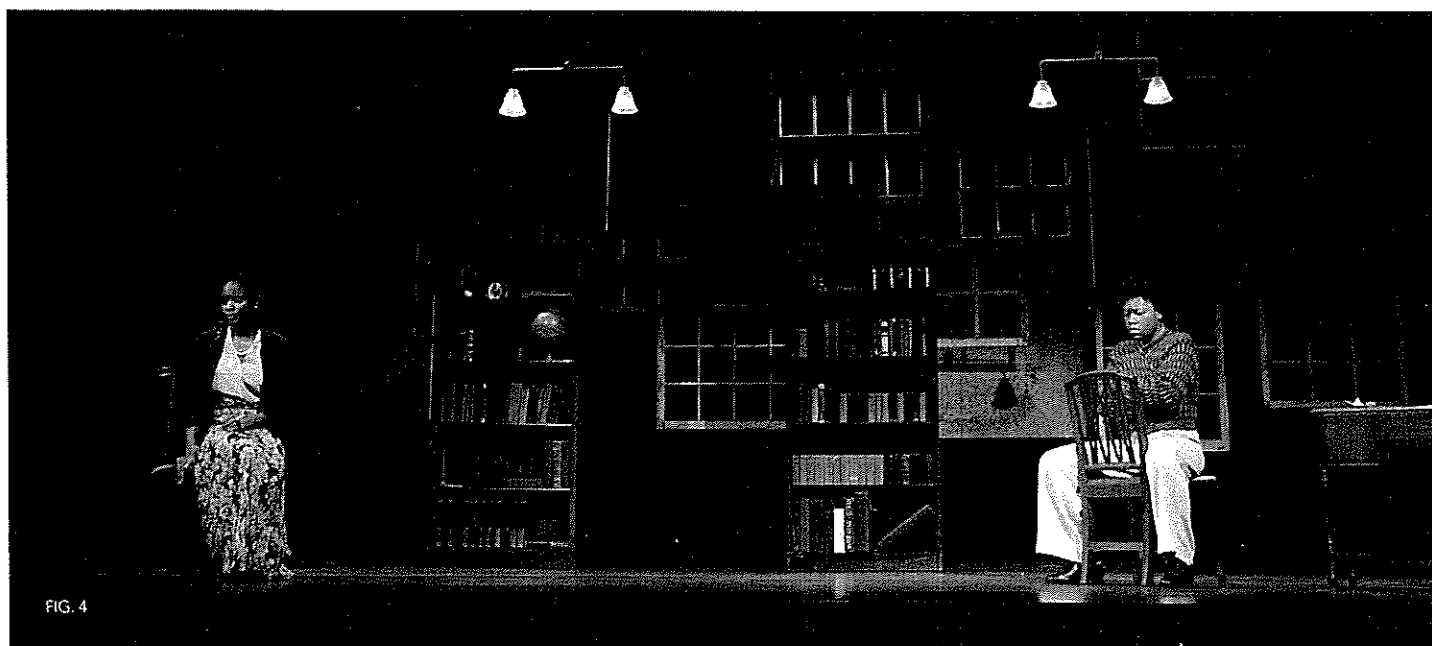


FIG. 4

Fig. 4. Act III: Divinity Summers (Karen) and Neonna Ferebee (Martha); Set Design: Matthew Allar, Lighting Design: Steve Holliday, Costumes: Jenn Baker. PHOTO ©Samuel Flint

NOTES

1. I have utilized aesthetics of the *òriṣà* in previous directorial projects such as August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and Katori Hall's *Hoodoo Love*.

2. Critics, including notably Jill Dolan, have criticized the play's ending for inscribing tropes of self-harm by gay and lesbian characters. See Dolan's *Theatre and Sexuality* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010): "Playwrights of some renown, including Lillian Hellman, inscribed the day's dominating opinions when they wrote stories in which lesbians and gay men kill themselves or live lives of desperate isolation because of their sexual desires. In Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (Maxine Elliott's Theatre, New York, 1934), for instance, two young teachers lose the school they founded when one of their students spreads rumors about their 'unhealthy' relationship. When one of the women admits she does have feelings for the other, her distraught confession prompts her to hang herself. For much of American and British history, mainstream theatre produced by noted playwrights had no place for a healthy, self-actualized gay men or lesbians" (8). See also Dolan's blog, "The Feminist Spectator": <http://feministspectator.princeton.edu/2011/03/17/the-childrens-hour/>.

3. Staging this brief intimate moment between Martha and Karen was inspired by a conversation with my colleague, Dr. Leisa Meyer. She referred me to the ending of the film, *Carol* (2015) directed by Todd Haynes, as an example of desire expressed simply, but with resonance between two women (actresses Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara).

4. The Kimble Theatre is not located on the campus proper, but adjacent to it in Colonial Williamsburg's Merchant Square.

5. In the lore of Oya, she is known as *Şàngó's* favorite wife, who committed suicide "when she felt disillusioned in consequence of the ignominious end of her husband's career" (46). See *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (1979) by Omosade Awolalu.

6. Oya's energy extended beyond the production. During the rehearsal period, the Department of Theatre, Speech and Dance transitioned from one academic building to another in anticipation of the building of a new arts complex and Hurricane Florence (a weather phenomenon completely in Oya's domain) impacted the Southeastern Seaboard. The combined effects of the transition and hurricane resulted in campus closures and/or rehearsal cancellations. As a result, the production team mounted this show with only twelve days of rehearsal and six days of tech and dress. During a guest talk in Dr. Suzanne Raitt's *Lesbian Fictions* course, I told the audience, "I don't know if we were single-handedly responsible for Hurricane Florence, but I do know that if the *Òriṣà* are invoked they will come." This is important to note as the *Òriṣà* tradition cannot be reduced to a theoretical exercise or set of mythologies to reference in the rehearsal room. The tradition is a form of spiritual technology that is a dynamic part of the culture, worldview, and lived experience of a socio-linguistic group and practitioners all over the world.

7. Most of the artists included in the pre-show soundtrack were either openly queer, black, or self-identified as women. Music chosen and arranged by me reinforced the play's storyline, amplified themes, or extended the COLL 300 theme, "Bodies that Matter," by inserting voices that mattered.

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FIG. 5

Fig. 5. Act III: Hannah Brown (Mrs. Tilford), Divinity Summers (Karen), and Anna Boustany (Mary); Set Design: Matthew Allar, Lighting Design: Steve Holliday, Costumes: Jenn Baker. PHOTO ©Samuel Flint

range of emotions, ending with contrition. They were witnessing Mary's emotional growth. Although no one knew for certain where Karen or Mary's paths would end (in keeping with the original ending), it was evident that redemption and harmony were there for the taking, if either of them chose it.

In *The Children's Hour*, Hellman employs a revisionist dramaturgy that encourages readers to consider earlier versions of the play as well as the source material, *Bad Companions*, and invites directors to embrace a similar practice in developing their conceptual approaches. A holistic understanding of the primary source, the adaptation, and subsequent developments of *The Children's Hour* can help a director avoid reductive analyses and stage productions limited to examinations of "good versus evil" as Hellman once characterized the conflict (*Four Plays*, ix). Storytelling approaches utilized in this case study—a reconceptualization of the text from an Africanist (and spiritual) perspective—allowed for a uniquely nuanced reading and understanding of the play. By forthrightly positioning my personal politics and pedagogies, and using transnational, inclusive casting as well as queer artistry, this production demonstrated the possibilities of theatre-making practices aimed at conveying the truths and sensibilities of everyone in the rehearsal room, and thus creating more humane worlds on stage. This inclusive approach is especially meaningful with such plays as *The Children's Hour*, where gender, racial, and sexual bias are evident.

Any production of *The Children's Hour* staged in a supposed post-civil rights "gained" era, will remain unsettling as long as Martha is denied her humanity and feels forced to choose self-murder. Yet, the theatre can be as honey, adding sweetness to the ever-present warring forces. It alone may not eradicate societal ills. However, with consideration of our practices in making it, theatre can offer enlightening perspectives that counterbalance darkness within the world and elevate our collective consciousness. Such balance and elevation can strengthen our resolve and commitment to seeing ourselves and each other in new ways. **SDC**

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development of a critical lexicon which affirms the premise of Black Theatre as a performance strategy rooted in social and spiritual practices of the African Diaspora.

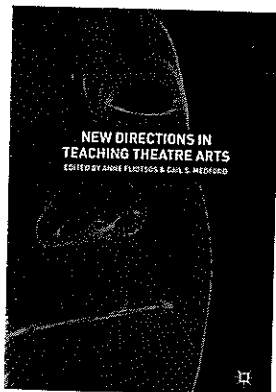
William Lewis suggests in Part I: "Teaching with Digital Technology" that "thinking through the digital paradigms to reassemble what theatre is and what it will be for today's students" is a pedagogical necessity (10). Lewis proposes that we stop perceiving students' "hyper-attention" to multitasking as a flaw and reframe it as "a way of seeing the world as a necessity" of growing up in a mediated society (13). Lewis urges educators to develop interactive theatre experiences, and looks to game design for inspiration. The next chapter in Part I "reimagines" an online Introduction to Theatre course. In the provocatively titled third essay, "I Had Never Danced in a Bathroom Before: Using Audio Walks to Engage Theatre Students in the World Outside the Classroom," James McKinnon suggests audio walks as a "paratheatrical learning activity" to help students "connect to the world" in an "experiential learning" activity (46, 55). By deliberately not including an actor in the activity, he broadens students' ideas of performance space and audience and fosters active student participation. The essays in Part I suggest practical technology strategies beyond PowerPoint for energizing the imaginations of media-centered students. "Teaching with Digital Technology" will also be useful at non-academic theatre companies looking to recruit and retain young audience members.

Part II: "Teaching in Response to Educational Trends" is a must-read for those considering curriculum design. Jane Duncan, Bradley W. Griffin, and **Travis Malone's** "Theatre Assessment for Teaching and Learning" demonstrates examples for mapping what students need to know and ties the examples to institutional learning outcomes. Kelly Aliano and Dongshin Chang illustrate ways to teach critical writing in theatre classrooms that still leave room for course content. Stacey Connelly describes her "transdisciplinary" model that encourages discussions of contemporary relevance in her First-Year Experience classes. Although geared towards first-year students, Connelly's practical exercises are great prompts for any directing class. Part II brings theatre faculty into conversation with a wider educational field, providing resources to improve the efficacy of our teaching and to track the ever-elusive evidence for effectiveness required by so many institutions.

Part III: "Teaching New Directions in Performance" challenges what we may have *thought* was inclusive teaching, directing, and producing theatre. Deric McNish tackles "Training Actors with Disabilities," gleaned strategies from The National Center on Universal Design for Learning to "provide multiple means of representation, provide multiple means of action and expression, and provide multiple means of engagements" (141). Provocatively, he asserts that "movement pedagogies that are concerned with 'correcting' the body must be reinvented" (147). Chris Hay and Kristine Landon-Smith critique "neutrality" in theatre work, claiming that this idea is an assumption of "cultural production" and is one of many "uncritical habits of mind" that "excludes alternate viewpoints" (160). Helpfully, they give several exercises to challenge these assumptions and "engage and embrace actors of diverse identities and diasporic heritages" (172). On a different note, **Peter Zazzali** researched acting training programs for how they incorporate video and other media as a 21st-century necessity (182). Part III serves to help directors analyze their own biases around what an actor "should" be, how actors "should" be taught, and how bodies are represented on stage.

Part IV: "Teaching Beyond the Traditional" provides strategies for stretching traditional subjects to become more topical and relevant. **Ann M. Shanahan** performs Kurt Weill's "Pirate Jenny" in class to illustrate Brecht's theories, engage feminist pedagogical principles that help students reflect on their own sociopolitical circumstances, and break down traditional hierarchies in the classroom (194). Jeanne Klein reasons that teachers of children's theatre should have practical experience with children and gives examples of how she incorporates this in a theatre curriculum. Sally Bailey and Paige Dickinson's

SDCJ-PRS BOOK REVIEW



NEW DIRECTIONS IN TEACHING THEATRE ARTS

EDITED BY ANNE FLIOTSOS
AND GAIL S. MEDFORD

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2018. 310 PP.
\$199.99 HARDCOVER.

While this edited compendium focuses on theatre education in the traditional academy, directors, particularly those

in nonprofit theatres and anyone teaching theatre, will benefit from its essays. Challenging educators to "rethink" classrooms for the technological and societal shifts affecting students, *New Directions in Teaching Theatre Arts* delves into contemporary students' educational needs and responsibilities. As editors **Anne Fliotsos** and Gail S. Medford state: "Because of its innate connection to human life and culture, theatre is a discipline always poised to respond to the pedagogical changes that will improve student engagement, learning, and success" (3). This connection helps to justify theatre education in a time of STEM essentialism because theatre helps students in all disciplines learn better. The book doesn't only indicate *why* we need to rethink teaching and directing methodologies; it also provides a plethora of practical resources for doing so.