



## GENDER EMBODIMENT ON STAGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH HESS

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## Gender Embodiment on Stage: An Interview with Elizabeth Hess

Felipe Acevedo Riquelme<sup>1</sup>

Last year I received an e-mail inviting me to a gender roundtable with Elizabeth Hess. After the initial surprise, I was excited about the possibility of meeting and talking to this renowned actress, playwright and educator who specializes in gender embodiment on stage. This feature of her work could be clearly observed in her last play *SPOILED* which she talked about and did a workshop on embodiment at Sidarte theatre in Santiago de Chile in October 2018. Nevertheless, I felt slightly uncomfortable by the prospect of me, a cisgender male subject, being part of a roundtable about gender violence in Chile. What could I possibly say from my privileged position?



Why should men be talking about the problems that affect women, in particular when it's about issues that we, men, usually cause? I still wanted to go; I wanted to listen. So, I took a female friend with me, to balance, if ever so slightly, any possible gender disproportion during such a delicate and important discussion.

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I immediately recognized Elizabeth from T.V. and tried to disguise any signs of being star struck (which I was, after all; I did spend my afternoons watching *Clarissa Explains it All* when I was in junior high school). And we talked and listened to each other. She was not there to just extract experiences, she was there to help us articulate them. That tone is precisely what she conveys on stage through embodiment in *SPOILED*, where she challenges actresses to embody the experience of Violence Against Women through the eyes of the men involved, whether they were the aggressors, accomplices or witnesses. She seemed to want to understand the sources of violence before judging them. After this meeting, I was curious. I wanted to know more, so I reached out. This was the result:

**Your work puts a lot of emphasis on working with embodied performance. Can you tell us a little bit about the role of embodiment within your work on stage as a writer, actor and also as a teacher? Would you say that working with the body is particularly important at this historical moment? Why now?**

In my book, **ACTING & BEING; *Explorations in Embodied Performance***, I begin by stating that there is no right or wrong in acting, there is only alive or dead. It is very challenging for actors to develop a practice that is elastic and evolutionary, rather than staid and static. This is in part because of the natural fear we all have of the unknown and our desire to harness it rather than embrace its mystery.

As an actor, writer and Arts educator I am interested in storytelling that illuminates the inner life in imaginary circumstances. This compels the actor to inhabit their instincts rather than illustrate them. It requires the writer to re-live rather than retell events. It necessitates that the educator encourages the animation rather than indication of the imagination. Embodiment allows one to respond in a visceral way that accesses a 'living' truth, moment by moment.

Working with the body has always been important to a sense of wholeness, but perhaps it is particularly poignant now - when we are bombarded with social media that overwhelms our senses and distracts us from digesting our thoughts and feelings, making it challenging to ruminate and reflect on the body's innate wisdom.

**Would you say that embodied performance is something that needs to be enacted outside the stage? Why? How do you suggest this could be done?**

It is interesting to consider the possible resonance of embodied performance outside of the theater. While I have developed the practice for theater artists, many of my student and workshop participants over the years have come from outside disciplines. The work allows them to access self-awareness in an unself-conscious and collaborative environment. They have mentioned the importance of inhabiting their ideas, so that when they articulate their goals, they are no longer disconnected from their inner experience. If anything, the practice reinforces the initial ‘spark’ that led them to initially pursue their particular dreams and goals.

We also live in a globalized world now, and it is essential that we uncover an empathetic relationship to otherness that comes from an experience of shared humanity. Community needs to be created from connection that goes beyond conformity to embrace the human condition in all its surprising, subtle and singular complexity.

Storytelling (and truth-telling) can be approached through invented language, visual images and transformative objects, which overcomes language and cultural barriers to generate communication that is layered and non-literal. By-passing intellectual conceits allows both the individual and the collective to arrive at something more akin to wisdom, where received knowledge is formulated in the moment rather than frozen in time. Experience is not reduced to consensus but embraces both complimentary and contrasting expressions of self and otherness.

**Another important part of your work has to do with working with different communities around the world. Where have you travelled and why have you chosen those places? How do you develop a poetics of working in a global community and why do you prefer working this way?**

Often the opportunities to work internationally have presented themselves to me and I have simply needed to accept the invitation! A colleague once remarked that I am an easy “Yes!” - meaning I welcome exchange with others, knowing it will also enlarge my understanding of self.

As an artist I cannot know what cultural assumptions limit my expression until I am exposed to other ways of being in the world. Consequently, cross-cultural collaboration increases my 'tool box' so-to-speak, by teaching me to work with a greater palette of emotional colors and textures and sensitivities.

I have been to such diverse places as Mongolia, India and the Philippines in Asia; Turkey, Armenia, Kosovo, Romania, the UK, Germany, Sweden, Italy and Spain in Eastern/Western Europe; much of Canada and the USA and finally, to Chile in Latin America! (I would love to increase my exposure to South America). My role in these countries has been varied: being a judge at international theater festivals; performing my solo works; creating devised ensemble pieces and conducting workshops/masterclasses. In all instances, I have welcomed the challenge of communicating beyond words themselves (although, my translators have been invaluable!), because I am interested in finding a way to radiate and respond with the immediacy of feelings that are as universal as they are specific. The soul knows no borders and is moved by the truth wherever it shines through. When we are not restricted by the external logic of words, when can often access the raw emotions they express underneath with greater ease; just as infants intuit adult motives without the filter of a 'civilized' response.

My plays often focus on what I call 'psychic landscapes'; where the inner world is expressed in outer manifestations through metaphors that are archetypal in their nature and poetic in the crystallization, or nakedness, of their expression. The more I absorb other cultural influences, the more my work reflects this desire to reveal the inner life in a way that is transpersonal and transparent.

**In your last work, you explored the topic of violence against women by means of embodying the masculinities that surround the affected women; this is a very radical and an unexpected exploration. Why do you think it necessary for women—or the public in general—to place themselves, rather literally, in those men's shoes?**

My latest performance piece called *SPOILED* explores global violence against women

(VAW) from the male point of view but is enacted by female-identifying performers as a way of looking at the sources of male dominance. It does not speak for men nor does it demonize them. Rather, it seeks to engage the 'other' to encourage understanding of, if not empathy for, the complexities that might drive such destructive behavior. Women are well aware of the victimization of their 'sisters', and rather than glamorize such damage, or give way to despair, the piece aims to empower women by channeling the male perspective. The female performers expose the inherent power of the male voice in order to dismantle the patriarchal structure that infects all our lives.

**Can you explain how the creative process mentioned above develops? Why is it important to reach out into these men's bodies and not just their minds?**

It is precisely the separation of mind and body that leads to disconnected emotions in which projection and acting-out comes into play. *SPOILED* investigates motivations, conditioning, cultural expectations and social mores that lead to VAW. Stories based on perpetrators reflect inner struggles and cultural pressures to live up to ongoing destructive masculine ideals that strip men of their emotional availability and responsiveness. Conversely, stories based on men who have questioned VAW or taken a stand in women's defense reflect their unspoken struggles with shame and vulnerability. Through this lens, the piece is interested in finding a way to open up the dialogue with men, rather than alienate them, until they themselves are able to enter the conversation without fear of reprisal or ridicule for challenging patriarchal norms.

**It seems that through your work you try to reach out to men, or even help them. Why is kindness towards those, who many would define as the oppressors, important in the politics of your work?**

I believe the issue of oppression is less one of gender than one of power imbalance, Women, as well as men, are capable of heartlessness and cruelty—and are often complicit in their own, or others' subjugation. The very fact that I, as a female writer, am capable of conceiving of the justifications for certain acts of inhumanity, is a testament to the power of the imagination to entertain the shadow side regardless of gender-identity.

Kindness, it seems to me, is something that needs to be extended to all of humankind. If men are not allowed to be vulnerable, they will continue to harm themselves and others, overtly or covertly, since this is the only avenue to intimacy that is open to them, as destructive as it is. To be tender and loving requires such courage since an open heart is available to wounding as well as warmth and acceptance.

Hopefully the theater creates a communal space where it is safe to engage one's emotions without censorship or shame. I would like to think art can facilitate transformation, by offering a moving experience—in the body, the heart and the world.