MASCULINITY AND THE MISE EN SCÈNE: *THE COLLECTED WORKS OF BILLY THE KID*[1]

Celeste Derksen

The 1993 Belfry Theatre production of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*,[2] directed by Bill Dow, provides a dramatic reconstruction of the ideology of Western masculinity which is played by, through, and sometimes against the bodies of male actors. The male performances (I am referring to both characterizations and actors' performances) operate within the culturally constructed codes of "The Western" genre and "Western" masculinity, which David Savran identifies as "maverick male autonomy," heterosexual exchange within a homocentric society, physical control and ascendancy. Savran also argues that this ideological apparatus is contradictory and riddled with cracks, and that "the exposure of contradictions within hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity can, in effect, restore a degree of agency to the subject of ideology" (14). It is with this critical optimism that I focus on the "cracks" or "contradictions" in the production which, whether intentionally or not, trouble the very ideals of masculinity it upholds. The disruptions occur particularly at points when the audience's attention becomes focused on the male actor's physical body. This has led me to theorize that, while the staged body experiences and displays itself through specific gender ideologies inscribed in the mise en scène, the body on stage is itself a nexus of multiple, often contradictory gender codes and, as such, may be disruptive of the hegemonic gender system which it is directed to service.

My conception of the staged body challenges the neutrality and solidity of its ontological status. As Judith Butler puts it: "the body is not a 'being' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" (139). On stage, the body occupies more than one "signifying prac-

tice" and I find it useful to discriminate between what I call the body of the individual, the body of the actor, and the body of the character. Although they appear to share one "host," the signifying systems through which these bodies are read may be at odds with one another, or may collude with each other. For instance, I once knew a male actor who would perspire profusely whenever he performed. As a result, he was constantly being cast in Stanley Kowalski-type roles. The mainstream theatrical system read and used his body in accordance with a gender ideology that equated perspiration with an essentialist notion of primal maleness. In this case, the body of the individual physiologically changed when it became an actor's body; and this actor's body colluded with the masculine codes of his character. Much mainstream theatre upholds such gender essentialism, by eliding the differences between the bodies of individual, actor and character and the signifying systems they inhabit and exhibit. But this essentializing process is neither secure, inevitable nor, from my perspective, necessarily desirable.

The impulse of theatrical production is to reduce the complexity of an individual actor's gender identity and the potential range of a performer's gender expression selectively in order to create a recognizable character portrayal that adheres to a particular gender ideology. This process highlights both the regulating and the performative aspects of gender. Hanna Scolnicov notes that "gender roles performed by "performers" never merely replicate those in everyday life; they are more sharply defined and more emphatically presented, the inherent iconicity offering both an ideal and a critique" (xi). In the Belfry Theatre production of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the male actors who portray cowboys reveal the iconic Western male in a manner that is made visible to the spectator and is indeed presented as both ideal and critique.

This duplicitous view of the Western male is evident in Michael Ondaatje's original literary work, but is even more pronounced in its translation to stage. Because the production mode of "The Western" is usually film or print, the transition to stage performance creates an "estrangement" effect, so that genre and gender codes appear overstated.[3] In Dow's production, the actors "play" cowboys. They are dressed in the Hollywood Western tradition — cowboys with clean chaps and boots with spurs, sheriffs with badges and so forth. They move through a set laden with conventional Western decor — wooden beams, rough wood furniture, rusted metal. When used in an indoor scenario (that is, the theatre stage), these elements create what I term a "den" decor. The "den"

takes markers of the outdoors, which Hanna Scolnicov argues is traditionally the male's scenic domain (8), and moves them indoors. The dislocation creates a heightened sense of the "staged" quality of this masculine domain. Costume and set design thus both conform and draw attention to gender conventions associated with the Western genre. Physical codes also follow suit. The male actors perform feats of acrobatic stunt fighting, wrestling, posturing, jumping, shooting, swaggering, drinking and so forth. They are manically active — both physically and verbally. The performance style often breaks with the conventions of realistic theatre. Rather, it is like some kind of Universal Studios stunt show, where audiences are treated to a "behind the scenes" look at how stunts are performed.

Fig. 1. David Storch as William Bonney (Billy the Kid)
John Novak as Pat Garrett.

Bill Dow states that this acting style was a definite directorial choice. In particular, the "shoot-em-up" style fight scenes were designed to expose male violence as an accepted cultural and gender stereotype and to make it available to critique. The codes of Western masculine behaviour are so excessively pronounced in this production that they have a parodic function — they are both

used and abused. But the parodic duplicity is not without peril. By presenting the iconic Western male as both ideal and critique, the production would seem to protect itself from criticism. As a spectator, I was aware of both a critique and a celebration of representations of male violence and, as a critic, I am suspicious of this kind of parodic doublespeak. Therefore, while I am attentive to the gender parody inscribed intentionally in the mise en scène, I am more interested in those disruptions in the performance which appear as "excess" — as something which the production cannot quite control.[4] I locate these points of disruption in moments when the spectators' gaze becomes focused on the actors' physical bodies.

Even in productions such as this one, where movement sequences are tightly choreographed and designed to present a particular reading of sexual and gender dynamics, spectators often read other messages which may undercut or complicate the intended effect. A case in point is the scene between Billy (David Storch) and his prostitute/girlfriend, Angela D. (Sandra P. Grant) in which they engage in a feat of drunken, acrobatic lovemaking. The entire scene is performed by the two actors while standing on a bed. The script reads as follows:

> *During this scene Angie won't let go of Billy. She continues to hang on. With her arms, then with her legs around his waist, while she begins to remove her shirt and then his pants. Removes his bandanna and ties it onto her wrist.*
> Billy Same damn thin bloody bed.
> Angie I'll have to sleep on top of you . . . or you on top of me.
> Billy I'm too drunk for a balancing act Angie . . .
> *She still hangs onto him, half naked and hikes up her skirt and sits on top of Billy facing him. Laughter . . . Slowly and carefully she lifts her legs higher and hangs them over his shoulders.*
> Billy Come on Angie, I'm drunk, I'm not a trapeze. (32-3)

The scene is meant to establish a playfulness in Billy and Angie's sexual relationship, and a calculated vulnerability in Billy's "macho" character. It also appears to endow the female character with her own sexual desire. Bill Dow, for instance, argues that this display of female nudity is an empowering rather than an objectifyin stance. Although the scene aims to upset sexual hierarchy, or at least show that heterosexual desire is a "balancing act," by portraying the female as sexually powerful and the male as sexually vulnerable, its intent is contradicted by the positions of the actors' bodies. How-

ever difficult actor Sandra P. Grant's maneuvers are, it is David Storch who appears most physically in control of the scene, since he is holding her. In one of many interviews, Storch comments that, although many of his other stunts appeared more strenuous, this one was the most physically taxing. He makes no mention of the difficulty for his co-actor (Chamberlain, C10). Thus, while the scene appears to give the female character a degree of sexual agency, the blocking undercuts this gesture.

Dow's attempt to use the female actor's nudity as an empowering gesture is further diminished by her character's status in the overall narrative. As is typical of the Western genre, the female roles function as conduits — the means by which men display their sexual prowess or power to other men, including the spectator, whose subject position, I would argue, is gendered male by this production. Interestingly, Dow cast a black female actor in the role of Angela D., thus also bringing into play the ethno-sexual stereotype of the dark, exotic, sensual woman. Such a display of nudity cannot be read outside the entire system of voyeuristic commerce of the female body. This system is far stronger than one instance of fictional liberation, especially when it is performed by a character such as Angela D., who conforms to the "whore-who-likes-it" stereotype — a female type that performs a function as male fantasy and/or fear and/or guilt release. Although the female actor's body is directed to provide an illusion of equality, it does not seriously challenge the imperialist, male-centred scopic economy within which her character's, and I would argue her actor's, body operates. Ironically perhaps, the male nudity in the play is more disruptive of this system.

The lobby of the Belfry Theatre displayed warnings that performances contained nudity. Director Bill Dow had some difficulty convincing the Belfry Board of Directors that the nude scenes were so integral to the production as to risk offending Victoria's demographically older, conservative audiences. Highschool students at a matinee performance I attended also received a warning in the lobby from their teacher that they were expected to be "cool" about this. However, when John Novak (Pat Garrett) rose nude out of a bathtub on stage, much of the audience reacted with gasps of surprise. I suspect that most spectators were expecting female nudity only — to which we are more inured. One young woman kept groaning "Oh my God, oh my God" until one of her male peers looked back at her and told her to "get a grip." It was one of those moments when the drama amongst spectators upstages

the performance. My own discomfort extended to the young woman who was being chastised for her "uncool" response as well as to the actor who stood onstage so vulnerably exposed to this reaction. This uncomfortable moment emphasized, and intersected with, the gender/power dynamics being played out both on and off-stage. For instance, what I read as the actor's personal vulnerability contradicted the machismo spirit of the production. Furthermore, viewing his flaccid penis undercut the hard, controlled, phallic image that the character of Pat Garrett appeared to represent earlier. The phallic economy of the play was suddenly disrupted by the appearance of its always already deferred referent. David Savran argues that masculinity is an act of phallic identification or assertion, which has little to do with the existence of the penis. He quotes E. Lemoine-Luccioni: "Display, just like the masquerade, thus betrays a flaw: no one has the phallus" (16). Novak's nudity not only shocks audience members; it shocks the entire framework of masculinity inscribed in the mise en scène. By displaying his penis, John Novak betrays the hidden flaw and foundation of masculinity — even the male lacks the phallus.

This scene occurs at an important juncture in the power dynamics of the play. Pat Garrett arrives at the Chisum Ranch, as Dow puts it, "dressed as a dusty gunfighter, takes off his clothes and steps into a bath, where the trappings come off. Then he dresses in his sheriff's suit and is reborn as the one who will kill the Kid." Structurally then, this nude scene is intended to mark a rebirth — the transition between Garrett's role as outlaw/friend and lawmaker/enemy. However, it is significant that the play, an imaginative, subjective reconstruction of "historical" events, is filtered through the character consciousness of Billy the Kid, who takes on a role very much like that of director at pivotal points in the play. Given this frame, my sense is that Novak's nudity (particularly the display of his genitals) serves to "emasculate" his character — to deprive him of phallic power. Despite the fact that Garrett appears to be the eventual victor (he tracks down and kills the Kid), the focus and "sympathies" of this production are definitely directed by and towards Billy. Reid Gilbert makes the point that in plays involving male nudity, the male body displayed as sexual object is viewed "with deep fear (and covert or overt longing)" and so routinely punished (483). Although I would argue that Novak's body does not function as sexual object, its exposure is punished. On the one hand, the nude scene colludes with the sympathies of the play by depriving Garrett of phallic power and

admiration. However, it also troubles the equation of masculinity and phallic power with the biologically male body.

The matrix of desire directed towards Garrett's rival is equally complex. Reid Gilbert states that "today, the male body can be displayed as icon of power and of the sexuality of power" (483). The character of Billy the Kid, and his animator, David Storch, embody this iconic position, which is ultimately both celebrated and punished in the play. Although Storch is never entirely nude, his body is the focal point of the mise en scène (he never leaves the stage). The most discussed and visually enticing instance of his physical presence occurs towards the end of the play when Billy/Storch is put in chains and is torturously hauled up a scaffold by Garrett/Novak. While the tableau suggests great physical duress, it also displays Storch's body in bondage in a manner that may be perceived as quite titillating. Interestingly, the speech Billy/Storch delivers in this position is an aestheticized rape and torture fantasy:

> They picked up the fold of foreskin one hand on each side and began to pull back back back back down like a cap with ear winter muffs like a pair of trousers down boots and then he let go. The wind picked up, I was drowned, locked inside my skin sensitive as an hour old animal, could feel everything, I could hear everything on my skin, as I sat, on the barebacked horse. In my skin hearing Garrett's voice near me on the skin whats wrong Billy whats wrong, couldn't see him but I turned to where I knew he was. I yelled so he could hear me through the skin. I've been fucked I've been fucked by Christ almighty god I've been good and fucked by Christ. (43)

The monologue describes Billy's body as if it has been reduced to one highly sensitized, highly eroticized organ. The staging emphasizes both the allure and vulnerability of the sexualized male body, which functions as both the source and recipient of desire — and pain.[5] The scene was the focus of the comments of most spectators and critics, who found themselves both attracted and disturbed by it. As Reid Gilbert's theory predicts, the mise en scène effects a simultaneous dynamic of attraction and punishment for both the sexualized male body which expresses auto and homoerotic desire, and the spectator who is implicated in this dynamic.[6]

My movement from the homosocial to the homoerotic element of the Western genre is supported by David Savran, who com-

ments that the cowboy "defined his masculinity through a form of male bonding that retained, at the least, ambiguous sexual resonances."[7] The same may be said of the male actor, who, historically, has been considered, or suspected, to be sexually ambiguous. This production installs the physically skilled male actor as a type of modern corollary to the active, individualistic cowboy type. The male actor (and I do not refer here to the individual actor, David Storch, but rather the cultural code within which he operates — although with complicity) and his cowboy persona invite a covert and/or overt homoerotic gaze which disrupts the heterosexual myth of Western masculinity inscribed in the mise en scène. It is a sign of the tenacity of the myth, that this revelation is so deeply embedded (it occurs after much traffic in female bodies), and that its exposure is attended by threat of punishment.

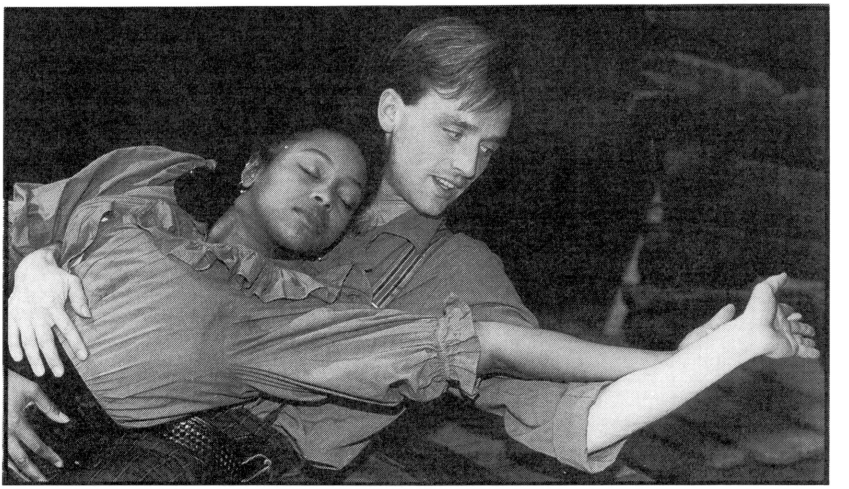

Fig. 2 Sandra P. Grant as Angela Dickinson
David Storch as Billy the Kid

As suggested earlier, I felt strongly gendered as male by the mise en scène — but, interestingly, not a heterosexual male. The admiring or desiring gaze I directed towards Storch was sexually charged in a homoerotic manner, despite the fact that I am gendered female. Jill Dolan has offered the feminist spectator two options when her position is gendered male: first, to identify with the male subject and view the female as lack; secondly, to become a resist-

Fig. 3 Ross Desprez as Charlie Bowdre
David Storch as Billy the Kid

tant, critical spectator. The position I have adopted fluctuatest between and perhaps beyond these. My spectatorial position may be seen as a variation of Dolan's first option: to provisionally adopt an alternate sexuality and gender; to perceive and desire the male object as a female subject in male drag — or is that as a male subject in female drag? This is a trouble spot which I have been unable to resolve. I am not sure that the trajectories of desire inscribed in the mise en scène leave any space for a female subjectivity. It is this lack which is so hurtful to the feminist critic of so many male homoerotic narratives, no matter how antihomophobic she believes her enquiry to be. Thus, while I found the production's construction of a male stage society (and the revelation of its homoerotic desire) enticing and elucidating, I also found myself disturbed and confused by my position (or lack of) in relation to it. As a spectator, I like the idea of adopting provisional sexualities and even genders — of shifting masquerades. However, the sexual and gender positions made available to me were limited by the production's adherence to the homocentric law of the West. Ironically, the most apt masquerade or position for me may be that of the "outlaw."[8] As a woman, I inhabit that part of the gender system against which the ideology of the Western defines and defends itself. But as a spectator/critic who is willing to don a number of provisional

spectator positions, or masks, I can make strategic forays over the boundaries of gender and sexuality, perhaps rustling a few "sacred cows" along the way.

Bill Dow's Belfry Theatre production of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* offers a parody of Western machismo, but its reverent celebration of the physically dominant male cowboy/actor effectively cancels its critique. However, a more complex disruption of this ideology occurs when the bodies on stage, and in the audience, create a disturbance: John Novak's nudity undermines the equation of phallic power with the biologically male body; David Storch's physical display breaks with expected heterosexual trajectories of desire. The actor's body, like that of the spectator, is a nexus of multiple, often contradictory gender and sexual ideologies. When placed in a mise en scène which is based on an iconic representation of gender, in this case the iconic Western male, it is not surprising that those bodies will create an effect of resistance, of excess, and may become gender's own "outlaw."

NOTES

[1] A version of this paper was presented at the conference of the Association for Canadian Theatre Research/Association de la recherche théatrale au Canada in Montreal, Quebec, May 1995.

[2] The play is based on Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems*, Concord: Anansi Press, 1970. The theatrical script was co-written by Michael Ondaatje and JoAnn McIntyre and first performed at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto in 1989.

[3] Ondaatje's original poetic work is also an unconventional mode for the Western. While this paper focuses on the language of the body in the mise en scène of a specific stage production, there are important literary parallels. Ondaatje's poetic exploration of the male "outlaw" icon (both the historic/mythic character and the self/writer) both champions and breaks the Western rule of "not language." Jane Tompkins explains: "Because the genre is in revolt against a [feminine] Victorian culture where the ability to manipulate language confers power, the Western equates power with 'not language.' And not-language it equates with being male" (55, my bracketed addition). Of course, the Western genre requires language to exist. This language conforms to a school which Peter Schwenger terms "the language of men," which is "infused with colloquialism, slang, choppy rhythms, 'bitten-off fragments,'" and characterized by an urge towards self-containment and control of

language (Tompkins 55). According to Schwenger's theory, this masculine "not-language" is contrasted by the opening-up of feminine language, which invites penetration, relatedness, lack of boundaries, and which is viewed as inferior to masculine self-containment. The poetics of Ondaatje's literary text simultaneously uphold and transgress such gendered linguistic boundaries. This is true of the theatrical script and production also. For instance, there are several moments in the play when frantic male activity suddenly freezes and gives way to dense, beautiful and brutal poetic monologues. Rather than "feminizing" the monologuist, however, these passages serve to empower the male speaker who suddenly wrests control of the word much in the same way as he previously wrested control of a gun.

[4] Peggy Phelan describes the concept of "excess" as follows: "Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The 'excess' meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible" (2).

[5] This monologue provides an example of the transgression of the Western rule of male "not-language." Both the physical and linguistic boundaries of male containment are made vulnerable, so that the audience's homoerotic response is evoked by both blocking and language. As Jane Tompkins puts it, "To speak is literally to open the body to penetration by opening an orifice" (56).

[6] This scene also provides an instance of what Jane Tompkins calls the "sadomasochistic impulse central to Westerns" (107).

[7] Jane Tompkins reaches a similar conclusion in her study of the Western film and novel. Her description of gender dynamics is aptly suited to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*: "the hero frequently forms a bond with another man — sometimes his rival, more often a comrade — a bond that is more important than any relationship he has with a woman and is frequently tinged with homoeroticism. [...] Female 'screen' characters, who are really extensions of the men they are paired with, perform this alibi function all the time, masking the fact that what the men are really interested in is one another"(40-41).

[8] My thanks to Susan Bennett for suggesting that I consider my position as "outlaw."

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PHOTOGRAPHS

All photographs taken by Bruce Stotesbury at the Belfry Theatre production (Victoria, 1993.)