

Challenging Age Binaries by Viewing *King Lear* in Temporal Depth

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Contemporary Western theatrical productions with themes about aging and old age often yoke aging to decline by highlighting narratives of dependency and loss in their live performances. One reason is a tendency to interpret scripts through the lens of chronological time, a sense of time that defines age solely in terms of number of years lived, and creates rigid expectations about life-stages. Recognizing the limitations of the life-stage model, postmodern theorists, building on Judith Butler's discourse on gender, have considered age in terms of its performativity and looked to theatre as a way to study this. Such discourses dismiss the idea that aging involves embodiment of time because, in postmodern tradition, they do not want to understand time as simply progressive and linear. However, some age theorists argue that postmodern definitions of age are problematic because they deny the very real effects of time on the body. By contrast, theatre and age studies scholar Anne Davis Basting insists that there can still be a postmodern poetics of the aging body that acknowledges its temporal component. In this article, Julia Henderson uses Basting's "depth model of aging" to analyze age-effects in a Vancouver production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* by Honest Fishmonger's Equity Co-op. Through a close reading of the actors' embodied performances and her affective response to them, Henderson argues that Basting's model reveals how the contemporary production of a classical work can engage with postmodern concepts of time while still considering age. In doing so, the production highlights more positive age narratives rather than reinforcing a narrative of decline. Henderson extends Basting's model by drawing connections with Marvin Carlson's theory of theatrical ghosting, suggesting that reception of theatrical performances of age is not only influenced by layering of memories of past performances of age on stage, but also by a kind of anticipatory quality engendered by the ghosting process, which she terms a "ghosting forward." Connecting these theories offers a way to differentiate between performances of age without relying on a chronological sense of time or restoring age binaries. Henderson's analysis contributes to the rather new body of research at the intersection of age studies and *Canadian* theatre studies.

En Occident, les productions théâtrales contemporaines qui abordent les thèmes du vieillissement et de la vieillesse les présentent souvent comme un déclin dans des spectacles qui privilégient les récits de dépendance et de perte. Cela relève en partie d'une tendance à interpréter les pièces à travers le prisme du temps chronologique, lequel définit l'âge uniquement selon les années vécues et crée des attentes strictes à l'égard des étapes de la vie. Quelques théoriciens postmodernes ont identifié les limites du modèle axé sur les étapes de vie. Ils se sont inspirés des écrits de Judith Butler sur le genre pour examiner l'âge en termes de performativité et se sont tournés vers le théâtre comme terrain d'enquête. Ces écrits rejettent l'idée que le vieillissement soit l'incarnation du temps puisque la tradition postmoderne ne conçoit pas le temps comme étant purement progressif et linéaire. Certains théoriciens du vieillissement font valoir que les définitions postmodernes de l'âge posent problème parce qu'elles refusent de reconnaître les effets très réels du temps sur le corps. Anne Davis Basting,

chercheuse en théâtre et en études du vieillissement, soutient quant à elle qu'il est possible d'imaginer une poétique postmoderne du corps vieillissant qui saisit la composante temporelle du phénomène. Dans cet article, Julia Henderson se sert du « *depth model of aging* » de Basting pour analyser des effets du vieillissement dans une production de *King Lear* de Shakespeare présentée à Vancouver par la compagnie Honest Fishmonger's Equity Co-op. Par une lecture attentive des performances corporelles des acteurs et de sa propre réaction affective, Henderson fait valoir que le modèle de Basting montre comment la production contemporaine d'une œuvre classique peut faire appel à des concepts postmodernes du temps tout en tenant compte de l'âge. Ainsi, la production met de l'avant des récits plus positifs du vieillissement au lieu de renforcer un discours négatif du déclin. Henderson prolonge le modèle de Basting en le reliant à la théorie du spectre théâtral de Marvin Carlson et suggère que la réception de performances théâtrales du vieillissement est marquée non seulement par une superposition de souvenirs d'anciennes performances scéniques de la vieillesse mais aussi par une sorte d'anticipation engendrée par un processus spectral que Henderson appelle « *ghosting forward* ». Établir un lien entre ces théories permet à Henderson d'opérer une distinction entre les performances de la vieillesse sans devoir s'appuyer sur un sens chronologique du temps ou rétablir des binarités liées à l'âge. Son analyse contribue à un corpus de recherche récent qui se situe au croisement des études sur le vieillissement et des études théâtrales au Canada.



Interest in embodiment is central to age studies. This has stemmed partly from recognition of the limitations of chronological time and its corresponding way of defining age in terms of a linear progression of fixed life stages. By disconnecting points across the life course such definitions create the youth-age binary foundational to ageism. Recognizing the limitations of the life-stage model, postmodern discourses have considered age in terms of its performativity. Building from Judith Butler's discourse on gender, theorists have looked to theatre as a way to study age's inherent performativity. These considerations dismiss the idea that aging involves the embodiment of time because, in postmodern tradition, they do not want to understand time as simply progressive and linear. However, some age theorists such as Kathleen Woodward argue that it is impossible to deny aging as the embodiment of time since aging brings with it very real physical changes; time is inscribed on the body (*Figuring Age* xxii). By contrast, theatre and age studies scholar Anne Davis Basting insists that there can still be a postmodern poetics of the aging body that acknowledges its temporal component. In *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture*, Basting refers to this as "the performative, depth model of aging" (145). The model provides a way to acknowledge "the body's performance of time in/across the life course" (145). It invites scholars to engage closely with actual bodies and their temporal registers on stage.

In this article I use Basting's model to analyze the age-effects in a Vancouver production of Shakespeare's *King Lear* by Honest Fishmonger's Equity Co-op. Through a close reading of the actors' embodied performances and my affective response to them, I argue that Basting's "depth model of aging" reveals how the contemporary production of a classical work can engage with postmodern concepts of time while still considering age, and thereby highlight more positive textual narratives about aging rather than reinforcing a

narrative of decline. The process of applying the model also raises questions concerning how to differentiate one age from any other. If, as the model claims, age is performative and every performance of age is an amalgamation of past and future age-selves, how can old age, or for that matter any age, be recognized or distinguished? To address this question, I propose to extend Basting's model by drawing connections with Marvin Carlson's theory of theatrical ghosting, a theory that considers the recycling of materials in theatre and how such recurrence interacts with personal and cultural memory to influence theatrical reception. In particular the recycled body and persona of the actor (53) become relevant in considering postmodern embodied performances of age. Bringing Carlson into conversation with age studies, and in particular with Basting's model, reveals that reception of theatrical performances of age is not only influenced by traditional ghosting or layering of memories of past performances of age on stage, but also by a kind of anticipatory quality engendered by the ghosting process, which I term a "ghosting forward." My analysis contributes to the rather new body of research at the intersection of age studies and *Canadian* theatre studies. While the junction of theatre scholarship and age studies has been burgeoning for some time in the US and the UK, this field of study is just beginning to flourish in Canada. Evidence of this trend can be seen in N ria Casado Gual's recent article in this journal concerning representation of aging and old age in the plays of Joanna McClelland Glass, as well the recent *Playing Age Symposium* held at the University of Toronto, February 27-28, 2015.¹

My analysis of *King Lear* deliberately toggles between the theoretical and the personal, specifically attending to my feelings evoked while watching bodies performing age during this production. I borrow from the methodological approach Basting uses in her chapter "The Body In Depth: Kazuo Ohno's *Water Lilies*" (134-46) (which I discuss in greater detail below), in which she attends to details of her affective response to Ohno's performance of *Water Lilies* and uses this to springboard into discussion of concepts of time and postmodern poetics of the aging body. Similarly, Bridie Moore in her award winning paper "Depth, Significance, and Absence: Age-Effects in New British Theatre" (which also addresses Basting's model), bridges her personal responses to performance with theoretical analysis of theatrical representations of age, aging, and old age. I am also informed by authors such as Ann Cvetkovich and Kathleen Woodward ("Statistical Panic"), who describe the compelling nature of blending the theoretical with affective engagement and embedding it within personal experience. Cvetkovich writes:

[. . .] the focus on sensation and feeling as the register of historical experience gives rise to new forms of documentation and writing, [. . .] practices often turn the ordinary into the scene of surprise, and they slow down so as to be able to immerse themselves in detail and to appreciate the way that magic and mystery sit alongside the banal and the routine.

(11)

Woodward also elucidates the value of critical analysis of feelings: "Identifying a particular and pervasive feeling, or a structured complex of feelings, as the cultural materialist Raymond Williams has argued, can help us recognize the emergence of a new social formation" ("Statistical Panic" 181). She suggests that "an attention to feeling can itself be a methodology"

(181). More specifically, in terms of theatre, I turn to Erin Hurley to justify the value of attending to my personal affective engagement with this specific production. Hurley writes:

Feeling is the core of theatre. It furnishes theatre's reason for being, cements its purpose—whether such purpose is construed as entertainment or instruction—and undergirds the art form's social work and value. Moreover, it organises theatre's functions and theatre's people's professional lives. And finally, it attracts audiences. [. . .] We go, in the end, because feeling matters. (77)

Feeling matters. And so, like Basting and Moore, I offer my own embodied critical perspective on the performances of age in this case study of Honest Fishmonger's *King Lear*, through the application of Basting's "depth model of aging."

Age, Time, and Narrative

Before I turn to my analysis, I first offer a more detailed overview of Basting's depth model of aging, Carlson's theory of theatrical ghosting, and other related theoretical considerations of time and embodiment, as well as their limitations. Basting's "depth model of aging" suggests that when we see a person performing age (in life or on stage), we are not seeing an isolated life moment. We are seeing the performance of an amalgamation of the person's former selves and a projection of their future selves, revealing not only the present moment, but an "accumulation of the moments across the life course and across generations" (140). She asserts that to see the body in depth "is literally to see time across space" (141). Basting developed her provocative model to understand the world-renowned butoh dancer Kazuo Ohno's in *Water Lilies*, a performance that she describes as semiotically spilling over simple divisions of youth and old age (134-46). At the time of the October 1993 performance, Kazuo Ohno was eighty-seven-years-old and his son and fellow performer, Yoshito Ohno, was fifty-five years of age.² The performance was composed of solo dances and duets, marked by changes in music and costume, in which father and son "alternately dance[d] roles ranging from a coy young girl and a sophisticated aging lady, to a young man exploding with anger and energy and an older man barely able to lift his wooden staff" (Basting 140). Basting writes that Ohno's performance "exemplifies an *embodied post-modern poetics of the aged body*, one in which the body is irreducible to discursive binary divisions, and one which acknowledges the body's performance of time in/across the life course" (145).

Anca Cristofovici's work is foundational to Basting's depth model. In "Touching Surfaces: Photography, Aging, and an Aesthetics of Change" Cristofovici contends that we often think of aging internally as a split between a younger self and an older, stranger self that is aging away from youth (269). While this suggests more of a binary that Basting is willing to concede, Cristofovici also proffers the idea that "[. . .] on the inner screen of aging, these shadows—memories of younger selves, anticipations of older selves—meet, conflict, interact" (269). Her essay focuses on ways photographic images can create a sense of continuity, of "the possibility of bridging our different age-selves, of creating a space of communication between one's own ages and between generations" (269). So like Basting, Cristofovici is concerned with visual aesthetic representation of both "the state of being old and the process of growing old" (271),

and sees it as possible to perform various age-selves across time, all present (and in tension) in the same moment.

Marvin Carlson is also interested in the amalgamation of selves in performance. Through his theory of theatrical ghosting, he contends that theatre is a site of both personal and cultural memory and that it constantly recycles material to evoke memories. These memories “have conditioned the processes of theatrical composition and, even more important, of theatrical reception in theatrical cultures around the world and across the centuries” (4). Carlson argues that in theatre, memory functions in a more central way than in other arts (6), in that theatre audiences do not encounter “a new but distinctly different example of a type of artistic product” (7), but rather the identical thing that they have experienced before. Theatrical texts, performing bodies, stage properties and sets, theatre spaces, performances within a production, even entire remounted productions, as well as theatre audiences themselves, are all part of a process of recycling. Carlson names this process theatrical “ghosting” (7). Of particular interest here in relation to the idea of simultaneous performance of multiple age-selves within the same body, is Carlson’s chapter on “The Haunted Body” (52-95), in which he considers “the recycled body and persona of the actor” (53). Noting that “text does not in fact become theatre until it is embodied by an actor and presented to an audience” (52), Carlson explores how the ghosting of famous performances of a role, and the ghosting of an actor’s previous performances of the same role or of other roles, evoke memories and create expectations which influence theatrical reception of the performance. So much like Basting and Cristofovici, Carlson suggests that any performance is an amalgamation of previous performances, and thereby also a synthesis of previous performances of age. I will return to Carlson as his theory figures into my later analysis.

Why did Basting feel the need to develop her “depth model of aging,” and why has Moore found it useful in studying age-effects in theatre? Why are both Carlson and Cristofovici also interested in the simultaneous embodiment or aesthetic representation of multiple ages within one performing body, and by extension in reworking ways of defining aging? What is wrong with a more traditional understanding of age as the progressive embodiment of chronological time? In order to address these questions I now explore various constructions of time (chronological, postmodern, Shakespearean), and their implications for narrative and embodiment.

According to aging, philosophy, and social theory scholar Jan Baars, we begin to think about time when we experience change (“Critical Turns” 145). A *chronological* or *chronometric* sense of time is interested in defining the *regular* changes that occur across time in order to be able to influence or predict processes. While the earliest understanding of this was grounded in the rhythmical movements of the earth and moon (145), a growing sense of chronometric time came to dominate Western thought as a result of the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century (Basting 11). As speed and efficiency became valued over experience and wisdom, time was separated from the rhythms of nature and became an external phenomenon linked to clocks and schedules. Time was thus stripped of personal meaning in favour of precision. The time used to measure human aging, then, became “not based on the rhythms of living nature, but on the ‘movements’ of *dead* material such as oscillations of cesium or aluminum atoms [in atomic clocks]” (Baars, “Critical Turns” 146). Such a sense of time defines age objectively in terms of the number of years a person has lived (Woodward “Performing Age” 183), and divides the life-course into stages—infancy/childhood, education,

working life, and retirement.³ In “A Triple Temporality of Aging: Chronological Measurement, Personal Experience, and Narrative Articulation,” Baars asserts that chronologically dividing the life course into successive stages is problematic because it presupposes a causal concept of time that implies that the effects of time are steady and universal, that people of a certain chronological age should inevitably experience certain effects of time (4). Further to this Basting specifies that dividing the life course into measurable chunks creates binaries in which one stage is valued and its opposite is marked as an undesirable “other,” for example: productivity/non-productivity, activity/inactivity, health/disease, life/death (Basting 135). Baars and Basting are both interested in how the meaning of aging is influenced by concepts of time. According to Baars a “the one-sided emphasis on chronological time tends to neglect not only personal meaning but *all* meaningful dimensions of aging” (emphasis in original) (“A Triple Temporality” 17).

From the perspective of narrative, the dominance of a chronological sense of time has led to an equation of aging with decline. According to age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette the decline story has become a master narrative for our culture (*Aged by Culture* 130). It infiltrates our laws and policies, the things we create and market, and our artistic products including theatre. The decline narrative is defined by age studies and theatre scholar Michael Mangan as “[. . .] the invisible but dominant cultural ‘message’ which encourages men and women to experience and articulate growing older essentially in terms of loss, isolation, and diminished physical mental and material resources” (Intro.). While historically dramatists have expressed a range of attitudes toward old age, and more recently playwrights have started to rewrite negative age-related stereotypes, the decline narrative has played a prominent role throughout most of Western theatrical history (ch. 1). Stock characters, life stage models of age, and linear plots are all used extensively and serve to articulate and perpetuate ageism through reinforcing the decline narrative. Modern and contemporary Western theatrical narratives of aging and old age, then, frequently show older adults as on the edge of good health about to descend into illness, on the edge of sanity about to descend into madness, on the edge of productivity and self-sufficiency about to descend into dependency, and on the edge of life about to experience death.⁴ Unless dramatic strategies clearly interrupt linear chronology, plays tend to be interpreted through a chronological lens (by directors, producers, and audiences), often reinforcing the pervasive decline narrative that predominates Western views of aging.

I now turn to Shakespeare because certain aspects of his dramaturgy draw focus away from chronometric time and therefore can be useful in theatrical explorations of aging. Shakespeare lived and wrote during an era when chronometric time did not structure society in the same way it has for the last two hundred and fifty years. Perhaps as a result, Shakespeare puts less emphasis on chronology and this results in a more ambiguous view of aging and old age. On the one hand, the life-stage model associated with chronological time is at times foregrounded. For example, Jacques’s speech from *As You Like It* (2.7.139-65) clearly separates man’s life into seven distinct stages, the last two of which offer a deeply negative view of aging, linking aging with loss and a return to helpless childishness.⁵ On the other hand, according to Maurice Charney in *Wrinkled Deep In Time: Aging In Shakespeare*, Shakespeare as a dramatist is not concerned with chronological time (32). He mostly avoids mention of specific ages of characters and the specific amount of time elapsed during

dramatic action (32). He employs a sense of “double time” in which there is “a sharp contrast between time projected by the narrative and time imagined to have elapsed during a specific scene” (29). According to Charney, Shakespeare’s characters age as a result of dramatic context rather than the logical progression of the narrative (29). They mature or age psychologically as they face important decisions, and as a result, usually gain important insights. For example in *Romeo and Juliet* when Juliet is abandoned by her parents and nurse, she develops a maturity and resolve as she prepares herself to take Friar Lawrence’s potion and readies a dagger in case the potion fails. Suddenly she seems much older although little chronological time has passed (30). So Shakespeare offers us a view of aging that acknowledges a potential gain (achieving wisdom), rather than a decline narrative that focuses purely on loss. But loss remains a prominent theme, and the before/after paradigm still creates binaries that divide and disconnect stages of the life course.

Age Performativity and Postmodern Time

When we consider Shakespeare’s plays, it is necessary to remember that they were meant to be *performed*. As such, narrative emphasis is not simply created within the text, but achieved through performance. At times performance can oppose or reorder the emphasis in a written script, and therefore must be considered in discussing theatrical narratives of aging. For example, there have been a number of recent adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in which the lead characters are experiencing old age. This can be seen in Tom Morris and Sean O’Connor’s *Juliet and Her Romeo*, and Ben Power’s *A Tender Thing* (both British), and the Canadian play *The Last of Romeo and Juliet*, written and directed by Mitchell Cushman.⁶ While these adaptations alter and reorder the script to varying degrees, the words remain Shakespeare’s, and the most striking change in narrative emphasis is achieved through performance, by virtue of casting Romeo and Juliet with older actors. The result is that rather than exploring the more common trope of teenage forbidden passion, the plays reflect on the seldom-staged theme of romantic love in old age.

To understand such staged performances of age better, we must also explore age in terms of its performativity. Considering age as performative offers a way to approach age in a non-chronological way, thereby offering an alternative to the narrative of decline. Judith Butler’s work on gender’s inherent performativity is useful here. According to Butler, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (44). Butler does not consider gender to be an inherent fixed category, but rather a series of performances repeated over time that give the *impression* of being substantive and natural, but rather are constructed through stylizations of the body. Similarly, authors Basting, Gullette (*Aged by Culture*), Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (“Putting on Her White Hair”; “Performing the Aging Self”) and Woodward (“Performing Age, Performing Gender”) all consider age to be at least in part performative.⁷ Lipscomb and Leni Marshall’s explanation of age performativity is illuminating: “[. . .] each of us performs the actions associated with a chronological age minute by minute, and [. . .] the repetition of these performances creates a so-called reality of age both for the subject and for those who interact with the subject” (2). According to Basting, the value of considering age to be performative is that it

moves us toward a social space in which no single image or experience of aging is considered more natural, acceptable or appropriate than any other (19).

Basting's enthusiasm about age as performative is adopted cautiously by some. Basting herself cites scholars Harry Moody and Kathleen Woodward as critical of the idea of postmodern definitions of age since they consider ideas of embodiment to be incompatible with the economies of postmodern time (Basting 144), which emphasizes replication, speed, impermanence, simultaneity, and immortality (Katz 191). Embracing such concepts can neglect the consequences of time on the body. In her milestone manuscript *Aging and Its Discontents*, Woodward writes that the body in advanced old age cannot be accounted for by postmodern discourses; "We can resist and we can destabilize social constructions of old age. [. . .] But death we cannot ultimately deny" (156). Woodward emphasizes her belief that "[. . .] there can ultimately be no postmodern poetics of the aging body"(157).⁸ The problem that she and others see with postmodern theories of aging is that, in order to avoid understanding time as simply progressive and linear, they dismiss the idea of aging as the embodiment of time. Like Woodward, theorists who are interested in embodiment are often wary of postmodern definitions of aging because they lack a temporal component that embraces the body's change across time. Lipscomb and Marshall who whole-heartedly espouse the concept of age performativity, still caution that "As with gender, age may be socially constructed and performative, but that performativity *is in tension* with the undeniable ongoing change of the body as it physically ages" (emphasis mine) (2). Basting's "depth model of aging" offers a possibility to understand age as an embodiment of time without limiting time to a linear chronological conceptualization. In performance, Basting argues, time is produced by the body rather than the body being destroyed by, or being a victim of time (145). I tend to agree. I believe that performances of age can incorporate simultaneous embodiment of multiple points across the life course and therefore be understood to produce a postmodern poetics of the aging body. The *reception* of such performances of age, I believe, is influenced by the receiver's history with other age performances and experiences with conceptions of time.

Performing Age in *King Lear*: Temporal Depth, The Default Body, and Theatrical Ghosting

I now return to theatre as an important medium to analyze the performativity of age because it often carries our master cultural narratives, at the same time that it has the potential to rewrite them. According to Mangan:

An emphasis on the *performed text* is particularly appropriate in relation to the theme of ageing, because in theatrical performances the physical presence of the actor's body itself—and the way that that body is used in conjunction with the codes and conventions of movement, gesture, make-up and costume—inevitably becomes one of the theatrical signs from which the audience constructs meanings (emphasis mine). (Intro.)

A written text like *King Lear* contains internal narratives that could be interpreted or emphasized in a variety of ways *through performance*.⁹ *King Lear* tells the story of the aging king of Britain, who rejects his youngest, best-loved daughter for her lack of flattery, and divides his



Figure 1. Simon Webb performs his own age or “default body” in the opening number of Honest Fishmonger’s *King Lear*. Photo by Emily Cooper.

kingdom between his other two daughters who ultimately betray him. The tragedy teaches the necessity of looking beyond a person’s rank, power, and words before judging their loyalty and worth. The play has been much studied for its age-related themes. Some research focuses on associations between aging and loss.¹⁰ However, prominent age studies scholar Helen Small proposes that Shakespeare’s textual construction of Lear in some ways opposes Aristotle’s negative account of aging, and shows a man who is not diminished in mental and moral capacity (67-88). While Gullette, along with other critics, also feels that Lear grows through his ordeal, and attains a moral stature that is hard to imagine in Act I, she argues that in performance “Some of the startling ‘novelties’ in directing *King Lear* in recent years come from directors and actors making ageist changes in the interpretation, staging, and acting of the play” (“Losing Lear” 61). One explanation for such renditions is that the play can be interpreted through a chronological lens by contemporary directors, focusing on the decline and losses that accompany old age. However, the Vancouver Honest Fishmongers Equity Co-op’s production of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* pushed beyond a chronological age-stage paradigm. The production, directed by Kevin Bennett, was performed at the Havana Theatre in Vancouver from February 23 to March 17, 2012. By applying Basting’s model to some of the production’s acting and directorial choices, I demonstrate how embodied performances of age can deemphasize the decline narrative and offer a more nuanced image of age by exposing the body in depth.

Honest Fishmongers is a collective that describes its style as follows: “We work with extreme intimacy, and surrounding our audience with the play, creating an inclusive, surround sound, lively theatrical experience” (Fishmongers para 3). Extreme intimacy was truly my



Figure 2. Webb demonstrating age performativity as he transforms to Lear of “four-score and upward.” Photo by Emily Cooper.

experience of this production, and for me served in certain moments to foreground an anti-ageist postmodern poetics of embodied aging. The play was performed in a small black box theatre. The audience was seated in alley style with a raised and a lower row on each side of the theatre. In addition to using the central aisle, the actors often moving between the two rows of audience seating on each side of the theatre. The central alley was not more than six feet across. The actors often spoke directly to audience members, and at times even touched them, effectively dissolving the boundary between actor and audience. In terms of my interests, this proximity allowed me to readily observe the subtleties of performances of age.

The idea that Simon Webb as Lear was “performing” age was first highlighted by the staging and style of the opening. As audience members entered the theatre they were greeted by the actors who were not in character, but spoke as themselves. Webb (who would play Lear) welcomed us, chatted warmly and suggested where we should sit. His posture was upright and elegant, his movements assured. He laughed and made witty jokes with the audience. There must have been a signal as the actors suddenly moved from casual conversation, to a tightly choreographed original song and dance. Webb performed with upward-directed energy and lightness of foot. He accomplished the choreography with apparent ease. At the end of the number, as the audience applauded, the actors moved to their positions for the first scene. Now, Webb (who was sixty-one years old), transformed to a much older man—Lear of “four-score and upward” (Shakespeare *King Lear* 161). Although he donned simple additional costume pieces, Webb’s transformation was primarily achieved through embodiment.

His shoulders rounded as if weighed down by years of responsibility. His movements became more deliberate and rooted in a downward energy, as if he sought contact with the



Figure 3. Webb as Lear (Act IV, scene vi) demonstrates performance of age in “temporal depth.”
Photo by Emily Cooper.

ground to maintain equilibrium, an equilibrium perhaps upset for the character by physical and psychological changes which accompanied aging. His hands appeared to tremble subtly as he handled the maps and documents before him, as if betraying the unraveling of his assurance. His voice deepened and his pauses for breath elongated. The transformation in Webb’s demeanor was sudden, complete, and extremely detailed, and thus served to emphasize the performative nature of age.¹¹

I focus on Simon Webb’s performance of old age because it stood out as a performance in temporal depth. The role of Gloucester, Lear’s contemporary, also offers opportunities to play the body in depth, but despite an otherwise strong acting performance, Anthony F. Ingram (who was forty-five at the time) tended at times to resort to stereotypes of old age in his embodiment of Gloucester, particularly after Gloucester’s blinding (e.g. shuffling feet and searching arms). In her analysis of the role of Kent, Helen Small argues that textual references suggest that Kent is also a contemporary of Lear, but “acts” and claims to be younger in order to secure a position in the service of Lear (an older man would have been considered undesirable) (69-88). In this sense, David Bloom’s performance of Kent was successful, in that his embodiment of age was somewhat ambiguous. He did not appear to be “old.” However, he seemed to be simply playing his own default body (he was fifty-two at the time); acting and staging choices did not create a sense of layering of former and future age-selves, and did not create the nuance of a man trying to disguise his age or offer the ambiguity of embodiment that Small describes. In contrast, Webb’s performance transcended age stereotypes. At several moments in the production Webb’s staging and acting choices created a performance of age that could be perceived as stretching across the lifespan and occupying multiple points in time, simultaneously. In these moments the edges of age categories were

dissolved, and the binaries dividing youth and old age transcended.

The most notable of such moments occurred in Act IV, scene vi, when Lear, according to stage directions, enters “fantastically dressed with wild flowers” and meets Gloucester. Webb entered wearing a wreath of flowers around his head. His shirt was unbuttoned to the waist, his cuffs undone, his shirttails out. He carried a handful of flowers. Among the range of images he conjured, was one of frailty as his movements suggested those we often associate with an old chronological age, a slight wobble on certain steps, a quivering of the hand as he presented his flowers to audience members. But also there was sensuousness to his movements, a slight swaying of the hips and lightness of movement that was reminiscent of a younger adult self. There was also a sense of wonder, of a pure joy in nature that recalled a child playing in a field. Thus Webb’s performance of age seemed a composite of former selves; he simultaneously performed an old man experiencing a dotage of frailty and confusion, a young adult flower child searching to right social wrongs by spreading love, and an innocent child.

Perhaps it is the common cultural narrative that associates old age and infirmity with childishness that helped to construct some of these images in my mind. But they did not serve to diminish King Lear. The child-like image seemed redemptive not infantilizing, and importantly it was not the only image; it was layered with the other images and served as a point of connection. So in keeping with Basting’s and Cristofovici’s discussions of accumulation, Webb’s simultaneous embodiment and performance of multiple age-selves seemed to acknowledge and perform both the connection and tension between them and ultimately gave the sense that he was drawing on a sort of elemental understanding of justness which existed across time (despite other points in his life when wealth and power obscured this). For me this strengthened the play’s message that sometimes it is only through letting go of our fixed beliefs (or perhaps fixed performances) that we come to see more clearly.

Basting’s model thus proves useful in considering the embodiment of age across time and illuminates aspects of this production of *King Lear* in terms of performance of age. What continues to intrigue me, however, is how we might define *old age* within this model. If we consider age to be performative, and performances of age to be a composite of former and future selves, how can we differentiate between ages? And how can we do so in a way that does not restore binaries that contribute to ageism? In order to propose a possible way of



Figure 4. Webb’s performance of Lear’s old age (Act IV, scene vii) read primarily as a multi-layered composite of former selves. (Pictured with Sebastian Kroon, as The Fool.) Photo by Emily Cooper.



Figure 5. Katherine Gauthier’s performance of Cordelia’s youth highlighted her projected future selves. Photo by Emily Cooper.

defining “old age” within this model, I would like to consider two moments in this production, when staging facilitated a comparison of the performance of age by Webb as Lear and Katherine Gauthier as Cordelia. My comparison of these two performances could be criticized for suggesting a youth/age binary since Cordelia is the young and Lear is old. However, I believe that the extreme connection between these two actors, along with their notably charismatic performances, and the similarities in their staging served to highlight the connection between the generations rather than create a youth/age split.

In Act IV, scene vii, Lear is reunited with Cordelia. Webb was carried on stage by the Fool (played by Sebastian Kroon). Webb’s body curled into Kroon’s chest creating a sense of fragility seeking protection. He appeared weak and ill, representing the decline narrative of old age. But at the same time, his body recalled that of a child protected and nursed by his father, or an

injured boy being carried off a sporting field by his coach, an overindulgent youth being rescued from a party by his mate, or perhaps a man whose friend supported him after some unimaginable grief. Webb’s performance of age read primarily as a multi-layered composite of his former selves.

In contrast, during the final scene of the play, after Cordelia has been killed, Lear carried her body on stage. He appeared from the same entrance as he had when carried by the Fool. Webb carried Gauthier in the same manner that he had been carried. Yet, Gauthier’s performance of age was quite different. While the image did recall a young child carried by her father as she slept (a former self), Gauthier’s performance of age placed greater emphasis on the future selves she might have become. As her head hung back and her left arm dangled, her breasts were raised to the sky. Her body appeared mature, sensuous, womanly. We saw her as a lover, as a powerful queen, as a mother who should have carried her own children thus. The image also, in recalling the way Lear was carried by the fool, reminded us of the old woman Cordelia eventually should have become. Basting herself notes that this forward projection is “tricky territory” (141) in that we can never account for all of the future factors that will actually influence a person’s aging. But she believes that “a rough sketch is quite sufficient” (141) to acknowledge the links between the many stages of the life course. To me Gauthier’s performance achieved this beautifully; the staging and acting choices resulted in a performance of age that highlighted Gauthier’s projected future selves.

I would like to propose that perhaps we could define old age within this model, as the combination of the willful actions and biological imperatives that produce a performance of

age such that the expression of former selves reads like a deep, rich, extensive repertoire¹² of past performances, so much so that it partially eclipses the projection of future selves. The performance of future selves, while still present, represents a thinner, relatively tapered collection of potential performances that read as secondary to the performance of the multi-layered composite of former selves. This is not to say that in old age the future is of no value or that the focus should be retrograde, but simply that the embodied performance of old age highlights the past repertoire of a rich life lived. In the case of Simon Webb's performance of King Lear, because I saw a repertoire of past performances of self that eclipsed the projection of future selves, I defined this as a performance of old age. In the case of Katherine Gauthier's performance of Cordelia's age, the projection of future selves was emphasized, which caused me to categorize her as performing a younger age on the continuum.

Such a premise—the idea that performance is a composite of performances of self—is bolstered by Marvin Carlson's theory of theatrical ghosting. Carlson's concept of "the haunted body" or the recycled body and persona of the actor (53) relates particularly to performances of age. This partly involves the phenomenon that our reception of an actor's portrayal of a role is ghosted by the former roles we have seen that actor play. Carlson notes that, while in the United States (and I would add Canada) casting traditions in recent times have largely favoured verisimilitude in terms of age (57) (or I believe at least discouraged older actors from playing younger), in other time periods and cultures, it has been and still is common for actors to specialize in role types or "lines of business" in which they play characters of a similar age for their entire careers (62-66, 81-84). Carlson describes the actor's "haunted body" as being ghosted by multiple previous performances:

Before we too hastily condemn the apparent folly and vanity of an aging actor still playing youthful roles, we must recall that every new performance of these roles will be ghosted by a theatrical recollection of the previous performances, so that audience reception of each new performance is conditioned by inevitable memories of this actor playing similar roles in the past. The voice that might seem to an outsider grown thin with age may still to a faithful public echo with the resonances of decades of theatregoing, that slightly bent body still be ghosted by years of memories of it in its full vigor. (58)

Here Carlson traverses similar territory to Cristofovici and Basting. He describes a ghosting process whereby audiences not only see well-known actors performing their current ages and roles but an amalgamation of previous ages and roles they have been seen playing in the past (67-68). Their performance exists in and across time, although Carlson does not address projection of future selves directly as these other authors do.

Ghosting, then, influences our perception of a character's age in that perception layers memories of past performances of age with the present performance choices. Perception of age is also influenced by what Gullette describes as "the default body", which she defines as a person's "package of habits", or embodied cultural attitudes and ways of behaving (*Aged by Culture* 161). The default body functions in the Butlerian sense (Butler 44) such that repetitive stylized performances of age become consolidated over time so as to appear as a natural way of being. Gullette writes "A body, like an identity, is better thought of as a series of try-ons and reaffirmed performances [. . .]. Age on the body can involve passive accretions and will"

(*Aged by Culture* 161). While Gullette is concerned with audience reception of performances of age on stage, and believes that reception of age hinges on “our culture’s unconscious shared understanding of the default body’s development” (166), she focuses mostly on age as the consolidation of past performances from the actor’s perspective. For example she believes actors can more readily play their former default bodies than ages they have not yet experienced, because they retain psychological memory of those bodies (170). Gullette shows concern for how cultural age scripts influence reception, but she is less specific about the role of audiences’ past theatrical experiences. Reading Gullette alongside Carlson is generative then, and suggests that Gullette’s default (aged) body is not only a matter of consolidated performances, but rather also a matter of reception influenced by theatrical ghosting. Well-known actors do not simply perform their default body, but rather are ghosting previous default bodies and performances of age, their own and those of others.¹³ Ghosting then influences our perception of the performance of a character’s age, and I propose it is influenced by the time span and the range of ages over which an actor has appeared before the same audience in the past, as well as the age ranges of other actors who have been seen (or heard of) playing the same or similar roles.

In *King Lear* this figured into my reading of Webb’s performance of age. Webb has been a prominent actor in Vancouver’s theatre scene for many years, thus many theatregoers will readily ghost memories of his past performances. My own reception of his performance of Lear (and of Lear’s age) was ghosted by the range of ages and type of roles I have seen him play which include: Alfred P. Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* (Gateway Theatre Co.), Polonius in *Hamlet* (Honest Fishmongers), an ageless god-type character in *The 8th Land* (Pi Theatre), Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations*, Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, the Button-molder in *Peer Gynt* (all with Blackbird Theatre). This made it easy to perceive Webb’s performance of age as primarily a repertoire of former selves. While the ghosting of other actors’ performances of Lear (for example Christopher Gaze’s 2008 Lear at Vancouver’s Bard on The Beach, or Ian McKellen’s famous performance in the 2008 television movie directed by Trevor Nunn¹⁴) no doubt filtered into my reception, the fact that I had not seen these performances live, coupled with the compelling charismatic nature of Webb’s performance meant that his own ghosting had far more leverage on my reception. Perhaps my reception of Webb’s performance was influenced by our cultural tendency to homogenize all older ages (usually those over sixty years) into the single monolithic category of “old” causing me to see his sixty-one-year-old body as convincing when playing eighty. But considering that I am aware of this issue, I do not think this was entirely the case. I believe theatrical ghosting, combined with Webb’s superior skill as a physical actor which allowed him to a certain extent to mask his default, meant that although he was playing twenty years outside his age range, he remained convincing in his performance of Lear’s age.

Carlson also suggests that if an actor is less known to audiences but playing a well-known role or type of role, that actor’s performance will likely be more strongly ghosted by performances (particularly famous ones) of that role or role type by other actors the audience has previously seen or heard of (59). In a way this could be seen as what Basting describes as a projection of future selves. The lesser known actor’s performance is an amalgamation of their own thin repertoire of previous performances of age, but more strongly ghosted by performances of the role set by well-known actors who in many cases may be older. This is almost a

“ghosting forward”; it gives us a sense of the future ages the young unknown actor might play, and the future roles he or she might take on.

Kathryn Gauthier was a young up-and-coming actress at the time of this production, who I had only seen in one prior performance (Honest Fishmongers’ *Hamlet* in which she played a male character). Thus ghosting of the recycled body and persona of this particular actor had minimal impact on my reception. My response was not so much shaped by memories of Gauthier’s previous performances, but rather by expectations based on performances by better-known actors in the same or similar roles. For example her performance for me recalled Melissa Poll playing Cordelia in Vancouver’s 2008 Bard on the Beach production, or Romola Garai in Trevor Nunn’s 2008 television movie (both tall striking blondes like Gauthier). These were performances that occurred prior to Gauthier’s, and involved actors of chronologically older ages; ages that Gauthier had still to become. This, combined with my knowledge that she was an actress on the rise, made it more likely that I read her performance of age as projection of future selves.

In both cases my reception of Webb’s and Gauthier’s performances involved the sense that they transcended stereotypes of age—an important contribution considering theatrical interpretations of *King Lear* often employ negative age clichés. Old age, despite the growing proportion of elderly people in our population, is still marginalized, under-represented, and often negatively constructed in our culture, including in our artistic products. Gullette suggests that ageism has become “to the twenty-first century what sexism, racism, homophobia, and ableism were earlier in the twentieth—entrenched and implicit systems of discrimination, without adequate movements of resistance to oppose them” (*Agewise* 15). One contributing factor is the dominance of a chronological sense of time that can result in theatrical texts with aging themes being interpreted for the stage in ways that disconnect life stages and highlight loss. However, some contemporary productions of classical works function to reimagine representations of aging and old age through embodied performances that redress or downplay the decline narrative and highlight more positive messages about aging contained in their texts. This was the case with Honest Fishmonger’s production of *King Lear*. Basting’s “depth model of aging” offers us a way to understand how some of this production’s acting and staging choices engaged with postmodern concepts of time without neglecting time’s effects on the body. Read alongside Basting, and Gullette’s concept of the default body, Marvin Carlson’s theory of theatrical ghosting provides a way to build on “the depth model of aging.” Carlson’s concept of recycling allows us to understand how familiarity with an actor’s previous performances of age, as well as with famous performances of the role (or similar roles), prime an audience to receive a performance as one involving a body in temporal depth. By examining my affective response to performances of age in this production of *King Lear* through the lenses of Basting’s and Carlson’s theories, I offer a way to differentiate between performances of age without relying on a chronological sense of time or restoring age binaries. I believe that considering the relative ratio of the layering of the repertoire of former age-selves to the projected future age-selves, offers a generative non-ageist way to think about performances of age.

Notes

- 1 Gual's article offers an analysis of Joanna McClelland Glass's theatricalization of old age from the perspectives of cultural gerontology and dramatic criticism. Employing "narrative and performative viewpoints" (108), Gual analyses the main and secondary characters considered to be in mid- or later life, and the seven plays in which those characters appear. She argues that "McClelland Glass combines notions of progress and decline in the dramatic depiction of her aged characters, generating an ambivalent narrative of aging that re-presents this essential human experience in a truthful and dignified way" (106). Gual's work differs from my work in this article, in that she offers a close reading of scripts, while I engage in performance analysis of a specific production.
- 2 Basting saw the performance on October 30, 1993 at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.
- 3 The number and names of the particular stages of age (as viewed chronologically) can vary depending on the theorist. The stages described here are the most common and shape popular understanding of the life cycle.
- 4 Examples: descent into illness—Morrie in *Tuesdays With Morrie* (Hatcher & Albom); descent into madness—Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (O'Neill); descent into dependency—Daisy Werthan in *Driving Miss Daisy* (Uhry) & Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (Miller); about to experience death—Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Williams) & Beverly Weston in *August Osage County* (Letts).
- 5 ...The sixth age shifts
 Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloons,
 With spectacles on nose, and pouch on side,
 His youthful hose well sav'd, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.7.157-66)
- 6 *Juliet and Her Romeo* by Tom Morris and Sean O'Connor premiered at the Bristol Old Vic in 2010 directed by Tom Morris (Clapp). *A Tender Thing* by Ben Power was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and first produced in 2009 (Morrow). It has recently been staged in Canada at Victoria's Belfry Theatre in 2013 directed by Peter Hinton with Peter Anderson and Clare Coulter as R & J, and at Toronto's Soulpepper Theatre in 2014 directed by Michael Shamata with Joseph Ziegler and Nancy Palk as R & J (Nestruck). *The Last of Romeo and Juliet* written and directed by Mitchell Cushman premiered at Talk Is Free Theatre in Barrie, Ontario in 2014 (Nestruck).
- 7 These authors agree that age has certain uncontrollable biological and physiological impacts on the body, and therefore cannot be understood as merely performative. In *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, Woodward contends that "unlike other markers of difference (gender and race, for example), old age cannot be theorized or understood as a social construction only, one that erases the real changes of the body that can come with aging and old age. There is a point at which the social or cultural construction of aging must confront the physical dimensions, if not the very real limits of the body" (xxii).
- 8 While Woodward rejects postmodern definitions of aging and old age, and maintains that the concept of age performativity has its limits (particularly in deep old age), subsequent to *Aging and Its Discontents*, which I cite here, she goes on to write "Performing Age, Performing Gender," in which she discusses age performativity at length.

- 9 Bridie Moore suggests that aside from scriptural elements, casting, and staging choices in Frantic Assembly's production of the play *Lovesong* may have contributed to a failure to inscribe temporal depth on the actor's bodies in a play that otherwise held promise for re-visioning age by virtue of its disruptions of linear narrative (9).
- 10 For example David Stymeist claims that while Shakespeare demystified vagrancy, he still linked it to the decline of old age and loss of family, and exploited public fear of the confluence of old age and homelessness to create a successful commercial dramatic product (37-47). Anthony Ellis argues that aging men in Shakespeare's time were expected to suppress their desire and that Lear's repressed desire for Cordelia (as a result of acting out expected age norms) has left him stifled, confused, alienated, and tormented (15-39).
- 11 Likewise, in her analysis of a production of Nick Payne's *One Day When We Were Young*, Moore describes meta-theatrical techniques (actors applying age makeup and slowly transitioning physicality while onstage through three stages of the life course) as creating a performance of age that bridges generations and approaches Basting's "depth model of aging" (11).
- 12 I choose the term repertoire here in consideration of Diana Taylor's work, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*.
- 13 Gullette gestures toward this idea in a brief discussion of Sarah Bernhardt playing Hamlet in midlife and Carol Channing reprising her 1964 performance of Dolly (a midlife widow) in *Hello Dolly* in 1995, arguing that audiences are looking for some identifiable aspect of stars as they age and allow more leeway for stars to play younger because they have been taught that it is a retort to ageism (*Aged by Culture* 167-68). She does not discuss in any detail the role of audiences' prior experiences viewing stars perform.
- 14 The television movie *King Lear* based on Shakespeare's play starring Sir Ian McKellen was directed by Trevor Nunn and originally broadcast in the United Kingdom on More4 on December 25, 2008. PBS subsequently released it in the United States on March 27, 2009 ("*King Lear*").

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