

Reclaiming the Body and the Spirit in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*

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Abstract:

This paper explores Irish identity through a recent production of Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*. The title character has been historically constructed as an object of sexuality and a paradigm of evil. *Salomé* is the opposite of the other principal character in the play *Iokanaan*, or John the Baptist, whose chaste spirituality sets him as a paradigm of the holy. Yet, clearly, in Wilde's play these two characters are drawn towards each other and, in fact, both are destined to die simply because of who they are. It is this very binary of the sexual and the spiritual, the evil versus the holy, that is embedded in Irish and Western ideas around what is good and what is bad in human experience. This paper explores, through performance as research, an integration of the corporeal and spiritual in a search for the integration of the fullness of identity that values all aspects of the human condition.

Keywords: gender, history, Oscar Wilde, sexuality, theatre

In Irish culture, society, philosophy and theology the Western binary of the body and the spirit have dominated the conversation around the existential qualities of the human condition. The body, and consequently sexuality, have been consigned to the carnal and are, oftentimes, categorized as the antithesis of the spiritual. Consequently, in the Irish cultural context and, as I will argue, the discourse of Irish Studies, sexuality has been inferred as an obstacle to spiritual enlightenment, and its passions a temptation that pulls in the opposite direction of enlightenment. In the social order of contemporary Ireland, Oscar Wilde has become a symbol of a liberated Irish sense of sexual liberation. Wilde's play *Salomé* (1893) is unusual in the canon of his infamous social satires, and offers a performance of Irish identity that is more historically rooted in the ancient culture of Ireland. Through this paper

I will explore how the theatre, so important in Irish cultural studies, offers a unique opportunity to recapture a type of Irish identity that wholeheartedly rejects the prudery of colonial propriety in favor of a more ancient sensuality that integrates the sexual and the spiritual. I will do so by incorporating reflections on a production of *Salomé* that I directed, succinctly applying the theories listed in this paper.

Incorporating theatrical practice through play production into traditional epistemologies of academic research allows for theory to become practice through theatrical technique and design aesthetic. In my own production of *Salomé*, produced by Villanova Theatre in the Spring of 2013, I used theories of gender and sexual identity to uncover and explore the questions Oscar Wilde asks about subjectivity. While I will detail some of the directorial technique I used with actors later in the paper, it is important to begin a discussion of theatre practice as research by describing its impact on design. In order to open up a world that creates animosity between the spiritual and the corporeal, the set of my production was entirely open to the back wall of the theatre, never hiding the work of the theatre from the performance of the production. The establishment of this exposed space created the open context in which systems of thought are symbolically freed from a seemingly seamless historical world. The cultural discourse on sexual and spiritual identity works systematically to normalize the distance between right and wrong, good and bad that allows the individual to see the sexual and the spiritual as opposite. The deconstructive quality of the set in my production of *Salomé* advances a gender identity research methodology that seeks to establish a new space to explore new ideas.

In his article “Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland”, Tom Inglis addresses the sensitive issue of sexuality and Irishness from a historical perspective; he writes:

The history of the body and corporeal remains a relatively hidden area of research. Most of the recent grand histories, have avoided dealing with the cultural context of cultural constructs of sexuality directly but have focused instead on such issues as censorship, the multifaceted role of the Catholic church, fertility control, and more recently, the sex-abuse scandals involving the Catholic church. (2005, 9)

With its intellectual, historical and phenomenological practices, the theatre offers a unique opportunity to engage with historical realities as they exist ideologically and, through the live presence of the actors’ body representing the past in the present. In this sense, the theatre allows what is hidden in the annals of traditional histories to become visible now, thus providing people and societies the opportunity to integrate the past with the present like no other human activity. Through live performance the theatre creates an opportunity to engage historical silences such as the ideas of Irish sexuality in culture in order to examine how these ideas have become sedimented in

contemporary times. When watching a historical character on stage grapple with contemporary tensions, the past uniquely informs the present so that new awarenesses and possibilities may begin to emerge.

Few other historical characters, fictional or otherwise, have been vilified as purely sexual, and thus evil, as Salomé. In Wilde's play, Salomé is torn between the material power of state and the spiritual attraction to Iokanaan, or John the Baptist. In this paper I investigate the complex process of re-routing of the sexual towards the spiritual in an analysis of *Salomé* that explores the connection between physical and spiritual desire. This endeavor seems radically important for the new Ireland as the binary of the spiritual and the sexual has become so distant that, at least in academic writing, they remain staunchly separate. This curiosity was central to the process of the production of the play that I directed¹. The production rehearsal process involved the implementation of feminist theories of the body through production techniques of physical theatre, in particular the techniques of Jacques Lecoq (2000). Through the production and design process I sought to re-route the binary of the sexual and the spiritual in search of a paradigm of praxis that asserts Salomé's sexuality as integrated into her spiritual consciousness and to illuminate that her only currency, material or spiritual, in the world of this play is her body. I will assert that in the end she chooses to spend that currency on the spiritual rather than the carnal.

Oscar Wilde wrote *Salomé* in French in 1891. Three years later, his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas published the first English translation. The play is written in one Act and tells the story of the daughter of Herodias and the step-daughter of the Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Judea before and during the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The play takes the liberty of articulating the under-articulated life of the biblical character of Salomé who, much to her step-father's horror, requests the head of the great Jewish prophet Iokanaan, better known as John the Baptist.

Wilde builds on the historical portrayal of Salomé as young, beautiful, extremely sexual and self-absorbed. Salomé is aware of her sexual power and uses it to advance her desires for attention and material prosperity. As the seductive Salomé flees the confines of the palace, she declares:

I'm not staying. I can't. Why is the tetrarch always looking at me with those mole's eyes under those flickering eyelids? ... It's bizarre, my mother's husband looking at me like that. I don't know what it could mean... Actually, yes, I do know. (2001 [1893], 15)²

¹ *Salomé*, dir. David Cregan, Vasey Theatre, Villanova University, Spring 2013.

² Wilde (2001 [1893]); subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition.

Salomé is willful and narcissistic, but the audiences' first experience of her is nuanced by the image of a young woman escaping from a world that she experiences as oppressive and harassed, despite its luxury and privilege.

In this moment of absconding, Wilde represents the tension between sexual seductiveness as liberatory and as restrictive. Salomé's sexual power gives her freedom from the historical servitude that was the reality of women in the ancient world. Sex is her currency, if you will, a commodity that allows her to make choices in a world in which even women of high birth are pawns in the hands of a more powerful and dominant patriarchy.

In her seminal book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan describes the latent meaning in theatrical representations of female sexuality:

Sexuality, however, is a tangible currency in the representational exchange. Sexuality is at base the expression of affectional preference, while gender is based on sex-class. But sexuality, in Western culture, is as rigidly constructed and prescribed as gender. While it is crucial not to conflate sexuality with gender, expressions of sexuality further illustrate the operation of gender codes and constructs the representation of the female body. (1988, 63)

Dolan provides a context for the evaluation of representation in performance that invites an interpretation of the hyper-sexualized artistic representations of Salomé as prescribed and regulatory, but also as a form of agency as a currency within gender constructions. If this representational context is applied to *Salomé* we can interpret the title character as more than a vindictive seductress, simply bent on punishing men for their assaulting desires, but perhaps as a woman using the only currency she has access to in this historical context to purchase for herself a modicum of self-determination.

Immediately after fleeing the lust of Herod and the palace Salomé continues:

How nice and fresh the air is here! You can breath here. Back in there are Jerusalem Jews tearing each other apart over their ridiculous ceremonies, and swilling barbarians dumping their wine on the tiles, and Smyrna Greeks with their painted eyes and rouged cheeks and corkscrew curls, and subtle Egyptians who don't say a word with their jade fingernails and their dusty mantles, and hulking Romans with animal impulses and raunchy language. Oh, I detest those Romans! Such rank plebeians, lording it over everyone else. (13)

This monologue illustrates what Dolan describes as Salomé's gendered position, as she rails against the list of religious and cultural contexts which confine and oppress her as a woman: Jews, Greeks, Egyptians, and Romans. Salomé's sexual currency is withheld from this broad group of political and religious constituencies and so while she is gendered by her sexuality she takes possession of masculine desire as she decides where she wants to spend this precious commodity.

How then does this historical re-representation of a biblical figure impact Irish identity? On the surface this question might be answered by making associations between Oscar Wilde's own sexual history, something I will return to later in the paper. And yet, the character of Salomé offers a unique opportunity to make connections between Western history generally, and Irish history specifically. Irish drama is haunted by Cathleen Ni Houlihan, or the female representation of Ireland, otherwise known as Hibernia. This representation is at times courageous and provocative and at other times oppressed and dominated by the political whims of men. Consider then that Salomé is, in fact, a representation of Ireland searching for a kind of freedom from the oppression of the politics of men; or that she is a representation of a feminine restlessness that may well be associated with contemporary Irish women, if not the nation at large. Wilde searches biblical history with an attention to spiritual longing, but is there an Irish spiritual history that is less prudish, one that integrates the fullness of the spiritual and the sexual? Through the production that I directed I was able to direct actors to interpret the scenes with a fresh approach to the ancient ideas represented in the play. For example, when blocking the scene between Ikonannan and Salomé I suggested that the actors play it as an unrequited love scene in which both are fascinated by the other but also intimidated and apprehensive. A more traditional direction would establish the two characters as enemies, thus pitting the spiritual Ikonannan against the sexualized Salomé. This antagonistic scene would reinforce the stereotypes of the fallen women and the holy man, allowing each to remain in their own opposite corner. By allowing the two to be attracted to one another a new idea emerges and the audience is offered a more complex, and what I would argue more accurate, version of real human experience as it is pulled between these binaries. Thus theory becomes praxis.

The answer to this Irish historical inquiry is, yes. In her article "The Power of Display: Sheela na gigs and Folklore Customs", Starr Goode describes the ancient Irish representation of Sheela na gig, a goddess, much like Salomé, associated with female sexuality:

Whatever the original purposes of the Sheela na gigs, over the years many folk customs have become associated with the figures. The debate about their meaning started in the 19th century when Antiquarians were stirred by a passion for things of the past. Puzzled by these strange images, they began to question why carvings of nude females in brazen sexual display of themselves appeared on medieval churches throughout the islands of Ireland and Britain. In the popular belief of country people, Sheelas were employed to help with fertility, to heal, and to bring good luck. These later rural traditions expanded on the Sheela's first use as a guardian rooted in the apotropaic display of her naked sex. (2013)

Goode's historical research offers a female goddess whose sexuality in Ireland was associated with power and healing. By drawing the connection

between a pre-colonial version of female agency and *Salomé* we connect a representation of Irish womanhood as both sexual and spiritual. By where did the divide between the sexual and the spiritual take root in Ireland?

Tom Inglis, in his aforementioned article, describes the purpose of his research thus:

The central argument of this article is that while sexual desire and pleasure are obviously rooted in the body and soul of the individual, they are also central to social order and social control. Over the last fifty years we have moved in Ireland from a Catholic culture of self-abnegation in which sexual desire and desire were repressed, to a culture of consumption and self-indulgence in which the fulfillment of pleasures and desires is emphasized. (2005, 11)

In Wilde's *Salomé* we see a theatrical representation of this type of moral dualistic economy that separates the sexual from the spiritual in the characters of *Salomé* and *Iokanaan*. He is the abstinent spiritual male character, and *Salomé* is the hyper-sexualized and self-indulged woman of the world. And yet, these two characters are oddly attracted to one another, a subject I will engage later.

Inglis suggests that this type of divide between sexuality and morality has its roots in the powerful Victorian influence on Irish mores: the same influences that punished Wilde himself, who was writing in this very era. He writes: "Victorians were accustomed to thinking about sex in terms of sexual emotions. Sex was about dark primeval forces, anarchic and explosive instincts that knew no values, possessed no morality, and had no sense of good and evil" (Inglis 2005, 13). This Victorian sexual discourse positioned sexuality as destructive and base, and the spiritual as enlightened. The very synergy of Wilde's *Salomé* is about driving these two forces that the Victorians separated together.

How does the character of *Salomé* reconfigure colonial constrictions of Irish female sexuality for contemporary audiences? Let us return for a moment to Dolan's theory that sexuality is, as she describes it "at base the expression of affectional preference". In other words, the performance of sexuality is not simply an embodied expression of social constructionism, but also holds within its repertoire of semiotic knowledges the agency implied by the application of 'preference'. *Salomé*'s departure from the strictly governed cultural etiquette of the palace can be understood as an attempt to reconfigure the expectations that are oppressing her in the burgeoning world of her awareness of her sexual currency. Therefore, the steps of the palace are a liminal space, as *Salomé* exerts a preferential option for self-determinacy.

What is so fascinating about this project from the point of view of research is that in production of a play such as *Salomé*, where in the live contemporary performance one encounters the historiographic reality of culturally imposed notions of feminine gender constructions juxtaposed with mod-

ern experiences of female agency, there is no difference between the written word and the methodology applied to its analysis. In other words, concept, directorial perspective, design, and staging allows the theoretical perspective of feminisms to be tested in order to demonstrate if theories work. Performance as research offers alternative ways of testing gender methodologies of representations of sexuality through physical exploration, sound, and ensemble movement.

My own practice as research begins with script analysis, and includes uncovering the big idea of the play and tracing the trajectories and objectives of characters. Through this process the essential energies of the play begin to morph from traditional western epistemologies which favor language and the intellect, into embodied imperatives through the actor drive the language from the page to the stage. The necessary methodology for the application of a feminist epistemology requires the balance between social construction and sexual currency, as described by Dolan. The alternative application would be to ignore modern gender developments and create a two dimensional, patriarchal production of *Salomé* that locks the title character into an objectified sexual simplicity that supports historical misogyny by representing the woman as sexual and, subsequently, sin. This not only would betray contemporary epistemologies, but would not serve the text as written by Oscar Wilde. Performance as research affords a new way of knowing, that, potentially, frees the historical character of *Salomé* from its reductive and politicized gender maligning and offering this story from the perspective of the woman rather than that of the man.

The production re-routes established gender identities and ontologies, particularly in the relationship between *Salomé* and *Iokanaan*. While the men of the place bore *Salomé*, it is the voice of *Iokanaan* that breaks through her malaise and captures her attention:

Iokanaan Who is this woman who is looking at me? I don't what her looking at me. Why is she looking at me with those golden eyes under those golden eyelids? I don't know who she is. Nor do I want to know. Tell her to get away. It's not her I want to talk to.

Salomé I'm *Salomé*, Herodias's daughter, princess of Judea.

Iokanaan Begone! Babylon's daughter! Don't come near the Lord's elect, Your mother has stocked the earth with the wine of her wickedness, and the uproar of her sins is ringing in God's ears.

Salomé Speak again *Iokanaan*. Your voice intoxicates me... Yes, speak again. Speak again, *Iokanaan*, and tell me what I have to do. (23-24)

Salomé's arrogance and stubbornness softens with the simple articulation "and tell me what I have to do". *Iokanaan*'s voice, a voice that speaks a different story than that of the palace or of society, intoxicates her, stimulating a new longing.



1 - Photo by Paola Noguerras

The initial exchanges between Salomé and Iokanaan are fraught with the tension of the collision of the spiritual and the sexual. Salomé identifies something that she would like to spend her sexual currency on, and yet, the Prophet is chaste and focused on the mystical above the carnal. Iokanaan speaks a vertical language that connects heaven and earth, a language that Salomé is attracted to. But the only language she has been taught is the horizontal language of earthly desires involving politics, of state and of gender. Salomé proceeds to try to possess this new horizon she experiences in Iokanaan through seduction, her singular commodity. In Dolan's language, Iokanaan is her "affectional preference". In this choice, Salomé's sexuality in the play represents her agency as she attempts to transcend a gender regime that has dominated her.

How then does the director move from the ideological and intellectual assertions of gender studies into a readable objective or intention for the actor and for production? Taking my cue from Wilde's play, the body is the *a priori* or first witness. It is through the body that one experiences the regulatory regimes of gender construction, and it is through the body that one finds subjective expressions, or "affectional preferences" on which we spend our choices. Based on the assumption that every human person is corporeal and spiritual, a method of integration is necessary to accomplish unity for this ontological assumption. For my purposes, I applied the methodologies of Jacques Lecoq by beginning with the body and integrating breath. The integration of breath to the physical work – or what I like to describe as the dramaturgy of the body in which the actor researches the history of their experience physically in order to articulate character and ensemble in every possible way – was not just for rehearsal, but a performance application. Lecoq's imperative to begin with silence was our starting place as the entire cast gathered behind the set, but vis-

ible to the audiences, discovering a neutral physicality. From there an inhale, followed by a resonant hum was practiced as the actors as ensemble entered the stage. I used ancient *Mizrahi* chant to historicize the production, and we opened the play with a traditional *Torah* blessing, acknowledging the scriptural roots of the play. In a circle formation on stage the actors worked on *complicité* with one another, found silence together, inhaled as one and breathed into the opening of the play.

Our process began with the body and used breath to awaken an individual and collective sense of the more ethereal nature of our lives and our theatrical interactions. Breath and movement throughout was established on the foundations of ritual and meditation. These same discovered ensemble experiences became the root of character building and blocking. Throughout, my directorial vision was to rescue Salomé from the historical prison of the purely sexual and to rescue Iokanaan from the juxtapositional prison of the purely spiritual, re-routing Western ideologies that separate the two and create conditions under which people oftentimes feel as though they must choose between physical or spiritual fulfillment.

The dynamic between Iokanaan and Salomé is central to the plot, and central to the re-routing of sex towards the spiritual, and *vice versa*. If Salomé is simply carnal she is sinful, if Iokanaan is simply spiritual he is virtuous – both prevalent and dominant assumptions in the biblical world in which this piece is set. The ending of this story is iconic and has been told over and over again in temples and in performance. My work in gender studies compelled me to use the theatrical laboratory to destabilize cultural constructions and assumptions, and I did so by allowing Salomé to experience and translate her desire to the spiritual as well as allowing Iokanaan to feel drawn towards physical attraction to Salomé: in this sense, both dimensional historical characters are allowed to be fully human and spiritual at the same time.

Through theatrical practice the director can both represent and challenge social norms. Through my production I continually sought to reject the divisions that make contemporary individuals feel that they are either spiritual or sexual. In his article “Toward a Positive spirituality of the Body”, Thomas Ryan writes: “In a dualistic worldview, one’s body and one’s spirit are in a forced marriage, and the sooner the spirit can get out of the marriage, the better. When that I one’s world view, one’s body is more foe than friend” (2004, 22). While this approach may have been relevant to the political agenda of Victorian politics as it influenced Irish ideas and practices, it is no longer relevant in contemporary Irish culture. In this sense, Wilde’s integrative desires in *Salomé* are visionary as he explores the attraction between these two characters as an analogy to these two integrated parts of every human experience.

This play articulates the basic human desire to connect with the world as we know and the worlds that we sense exist beyond this one. Salomé’s objective throughout is to make “affectional choices” that satisfy the fullness of her

desires. In my interpretation, from the moment she flees the palace she is trying to lift herself above the politics of the world. Her aspirations are for a great and powerful love. Men cannot give her this. As I strove to let the body be the first witness, I kept asking how I could give the actor the experience of rising up. Salomé is condemned in history and in the play to the tragedy of murder, but for one moment I wanted her to feel the freedom of choice, the freedom the gravity of expectation, and to take her place with the things of heaven.

But what of these tensions in contemporary Irish culture? Inglis eloquently describes the radical overturning of prudery in twentieth-century Ireland and its subsequent replacement in contemporary culture with a self-indulgent consumerism. A consumer perspective on sexuality helps to create an even further distance from a culturally integrated sense of Irish identity. It instead opts for the use of the sexual as a marketing practice and thus keeping it confined to an anti-holistic approach the fullness of human experience.

A conversation around Wilde and his intention in writing *Salomé* has the historiographic potential to begin a conversation in contemporary Ireland where a middle ground is explored and the fullness of human experience may unite again to reveal a true Irishness. Ultimately, Salomé is punished for her desire and Iokanaan is beheaded for his chastity. The tragedy of the play allows the audience to witness the consequences of life when these essential energies of human experience are placed in opposition to one another. As Ireland reinvents itself, there is an opportunity to find that liminal space, the in-between, in order to remedy its historical and current social practices that divide rather than unite the human person. Wilde issues a warning to all who come to see to choose integration, to accept all of what it means to be human, and to aspire to a unity of identity that forever unites the sacred and the secular.

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