

KILL THE CLASSICS

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Why we must let go of classic works in the quest for better representation

In this essay about representation of women on stage, we argue, based on some recent theatre experiences, that classical source material always leads to problematic representation. It doesn't matter how modern or radical the adaptation is, as long as the original dramaturgy is followed, it always goes wrong. We further examine two theatre performances below.

The first - *Jane Eyre*, adapted and directed by Eline Arbo - we saw during the annual *Brandhaarden-Festival* organized by International Theatre Amsterdam (ITA), this year with the theme 'Female Voices'. This delightful costume drama with amazing actors premiered in 2021 at the Nationaltheatret in Oslo. Together with a sold-out theatre, we enjoyed it to the fullest. During the intermission, we were curious to see how Arbo would tackle the problem of 'the mad woman in the attic' in her adaptation, namely the Jamaican Bertha Mason. In the novel *Jane Eyre*, she is the "deranged" wife of Jane's love-interest Mister Rochester. Bertha isn't only trapped on Rochester's attic but, as a woman of colour, also in a colonial narrative. On this matter, would Arbo continue to follow the original dramaturgy or radically intervene? We thought the latter had to be the case, but it wasn't. After the intermission, Bertha obediently threw herself off the roof of the burning house, which she had lit on fire. The whole audience cheered, because Jane was now free to marry Rochester. As much as we wanted to join in this romantic delight, we left the theatre with a bitter aftertaste. What is *Jane Eyre* worth as a feminist icon if she doesn't stand for all women? And why didn't any of the rave reviews written about the performance, contain a word about Bertha Mason?

The second play we discuss is our own *Hamlet*, in adaptation of Abdelkader Benali. This show was supposed to premiere in 2020 but was postponed until 2023 due to the pandemic. In the meantime, the text had won the Dutch-German Kaas&Kappes prize, but on re-reading we were less enthusiastic than expected about the female characters. Together with Benali, we decided to rewrite them and provide them with more depth. Ophelia received new activist texts and an additional monologue. Gertrude stopped apologizing for having a career and a sexuality of her own. Misogynist clauses were thrown back like a boomerang or simply deleted. And we wrote an additional dialogue for Ophelia and Gertrude, putting them in an autonomous relationship with each other. In other words, we took all possible space to stretch these roles out, give them their own development and an existence greater than stereotypes. But this turned out not to be enough. We couldn't get past the limiting images that exist of these characters, both in the play itself and in the cultural archive.

Does this mean that we must give up on classic source material for the time being if we are to do justice to women on stage? Yes, is our wholehearted answer. Based on the aforementioned performances, we explain why.

The Mad Woman in the Attic

The book *Jane Eyre* was written by Charlotte Brontë in 1847. Jamaica was still part of the United Kingdom, where slavery had just been abolished. This colonial context is reflected in *Jane Eyre* in the form of "madwoman" Bertha Mason, who is mixed-race. In the book,

Rochester suggests that Bertha's madness was caused by the Jamaican heat and by her 'unpure' bloodline: 'Bertha Mason is mad [because] she came of a mad family;--idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard!'

The book is thus racist at its core. This analysis is confirmed in a multitude of articles written on the subject within postcolonial literary sciences. Arbo chooses to ignore this problematic fact in her adaptation. Bertha's skin colour is never mentioned, possibly in an attempt to escape the colonial load of the book. However, this doesn't have the desired effect. From the source text, it is known that Bertha is a woman of colour. There's no escaping that, even though theatre critics don't seem to (want to) know this. But even if you really don't know Bertha's origins, the racism of the novel seeps into the adaptation. In the original, Bertha is described in the following manner:

'In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell... it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.'

This excerpt is an obvious example of the dehumanization that women of colour have had to face since the beginning of time. After four hundred years of colonial history, this is deeply rooted in our collective thinking. This is demonstrated once again by the similarity between Brontë's words above and the following quote from Arbo's adaptation:

'Go have a look at my wife, Grace Poole's patient. Then you will see the creature with whom I was lured into marriage and then judge whether I had the right to break the contract and seek the company of something that at least is human.'

Rochester's desire for "something human" is legitimized in the book by portraying Bertha as a wild animal, who bites her brother and draws blood as soon as he enters the attic. Arbo could not delete this racist and validist scene from her adaptation because the plot would stagnate otherwise. Without Bertha's stigmatizing craziness, Rochester has no valid reason to want to get rid of her and Jane has no obstacle that stands in between her and her happiness. Bertha therefore remains doomed to a tragic existence as a bestial lunatic in the attic. No one questions why Bertha has gone mad, if she is mad at all.

The casestudy of Bertha makes it difficult to conceive Arbo's adaptation as a feminist play, something she clearly does intend. After all: if the sick woman of colour still has to die for the happiness of the healthy white woman, what is being validated? Arbo allows Jane to sympathize with Bertha, but that accomplishes little. The outcome is the same: Bertha throws herself off the roof and Jane gets her happy ending. She has inherited a large chunk of money and can now, as a free woman, get married to Rochester, who became blind and crippled due to the fire. Niña Weijers rightly sneered in her column *Clapping, cheering, walking off* in the *Groene Amsterdammer*: "The fact that he was now blind and crippled apparently also contributed to the equality between man and woman.' In a painful final scene, Rochester opposes his bride-to-be one and Bertha one more time: 'It's you, isn't it?' he asks: 'And are you completely human, Jane?' To which Jane replies, 'Completely, and I'm an independent woman.'

The 'self-centered' career woman and the 'climate wacko'

Within the margins of the original, our Gertrude has become a complex character. She is a first-generation career woman, aware of her Arabic origins and associated traditions. She is a loving mother who at times is also hard on her son. She is unfaithful to her first husband and enjoys her sexuality, although she already seems fed up with Claudius as soon as she is married to him. In her working life, she empowers women from all over the world. In her free time, she is a recreational drug user.

In short: Gertrude is pretty sick. However, what weakens her is that the plot demands her to be absent. At crucial moments, she cannot be in the scene, otherwise she would hear the schemes of Claudius and Polonius and certainly intervene. Therefore, she never gains much actual agency, for knowledge is power and she simply lacks knowledge. Gertrude is weakened further because she is listed as a bad mother in the cultural archive. This is worsened by the sexist gaze through which working women are still looked at. Sociologist Dr. Fenneke Wekker wrote us the following in response to our *Hamlet*: 'Interesting choice to make such ruthless career-tigers of both Polonius and Gertrude. In general, women who pursue careers, much more than men, are judged upon their parenthood. It is notable that theatre critics don't judge Polonius' choices as a father in their reviews, while things are definitely going the wrong way with both his children. The descriptions of Gertrude are marked by judgments about the type of mother she is: a "self-centered type" who makes "questionable choices," "motivated by the desire to be an independent woman."

With Ophelia we also ran into the limitations of the original. The intention was to turn Ophelia into a climate activist, with an own agenda. From the moment of her first appearance, she bravely protests the adult world that is centred around money and has no regard for the climate- and housing crisis. Beneath her activism runs the emotional line of her relationship to her loved ones, all of whom unleash their own projections onto Ophelia. Hamlet projects his mother's infidelity on her, Laertes wants to protect her from "the newcomers" that he himself fears, and Polonius sees her as the sole cause of Hamlet's madness, which she is not. As is often the case with young women, none of the men listens to what Ophelia herself has to say about these matters. Her deep disgust and disappointment in the people around her, lead her to the dark conclusion that the world is better off without people, and therefore without her. After the murder of her father, in which the corpse is literally covered up, she commits suicide. Thus, instead of the sudden love-madness that Shakespeare originally attributed to her, Ophelia in this adaptation undergoes a clear development of someone loses faith in the world and acts accordingly.

Despite this clear upgrade of Ophelia, she is not taken seriously by the majority of the adult audience. Several reviews have even described her as a "climate wacko". A description that shocked us, because that is of course not what we intended. We thought we could escape the straitjacket of Ophelia's archetypal madness, but as with *Jane Eyre*, the cultural archive caught up with us. Ophelia will always remain crazy, because her character is no more than crazy. That's how she's seen by anyone who knows the original play, no matter how powerful you make her out to be. Teenagers, most of whom do not know the original, turn out to react very differently to our Ophelia: they recognize themselves in her struggle. During school

performances, she is welcomed with enthusiastic cheering like Gen Z-hero Greta Thunberg. That is their cultural archive.

Bertha as love-interest?

These two case-studies are no exceptions. In fact, all the adaptations of classics we visited recently fell short on the matter of representation. In *Atropa* by Theatre Utrecht the black actresses became part of an uncomfortable slavery metaphor, and the self-conscious Iphigenia was at odds with the sacrifice she eventually had to undergo anyway. In *Coriolanus*, by the Dutch National theatre, the male title role became a female character, which at times offered a new perspective. Her wife, on the other hand, was still reduced to being pregnant and French-kissing Coriolanus instead of having spoken text. In terms of social class, the representation in this play also fell short. The tattoo-sleeved working-class was consistently seen as blunter, dumber, less civilized than the elite. In *Bovary*, also part of ITA's *Female Voices*, the historical context of the novel was, without further commentary, extended through to 2021, the year in which the production was made. This created the curious suggestion that nothing has changed for women since 1856. Finally, in the adaptation of *As you like it* that Circus Treurdier made together with the Toneelmakerij, Orlando was inadvertently given a much richer development than his female counterpart Rosalinde.

In short: white, patriarchal stories, will always remain white, patriarchal stories. They fall short of capturing the modern world in an inclusive and equal narrative. In our study *Waited Long Enough*, published in the past September issue of the Dutch Theatre Magazine, we found that female representation is better off in mixed or all female narrative teams. However, all of the aforementioned performances were created by such teams. In doing so, no one got past the compelling structure and the old-fashioned values of these dated narratives. Thus, faithfully adapting is a battle that you can never actually win.

But why do we remain so faithful in the first place? Why can't Jane Eyre leave that racist Rochester and look for an actually decent man? Or Bertha as a love-interest or Jane? Isn't that a nice twist in the story? Why does Ophelia commit suicide instead of building an autonomous life elsewhere? Why doesn't Gertrude go with her? Apparently, we feel bound to the stories we know. And yet, we have to start letting go of them.

That letting is fruitful. Recently, we visited a number of performances that didn't take a classic work as their starting point but other source material. The performance *The Years*, also by Eline Arbo, was a phenomenal direction and adaptation of the novel with the same name from 2008 by Nobel Prize winner Annie Ernaux. Never before had we seen the female experience, in all its physicality, played and depicted so accurately. The familiar and simultaneously refreshing recognition the performance gave us, made *The Years* to be the best theatre we have ever seen. Also, *Sisters* by Sheralynn Adriaansz and Melissa Knollenburg was a celebration of sisterhood. For this performance, Knollenburg took interviews with women in the theatre field as a starting point. This made for a true celebration of the female story and perspective. This season Dood Paard made *Women in Troy, as told by our mothers*. Here, the classic myth of the besieged Troy was the starting point, but the original narrative was abandoned by focusing on the women and having the creators' mothers respond to the original. This play also showed that a male writer, Tiago Rodrigues, can do a fine job of articulating a female point of view. Finally, a performance that was also part of the

ITA-Festival: *Madama Butterfly*, by Satoko Ichihara. This was actually an adaptation of a classic but distanced itself from the original dramaturgy: Ichihara cut up the play, broke it open and turned it into a theatrical collage around the historical and contemporary relationship between Japanese women and white men. Four strong examples of the new repertoire we so desperately need. Let's kill it.