

# “THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT”: AN INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT TERRI POWER

*Alexa Alice Joubin*

## Abstract

This interview with Terri Power, conducted by Alexa Alice Joubin, focuses on the representations of trans masculinity in Power’s play *Drag King Richard III*. For nearly two decades Power has been at the forefront of trans and queer representation in performances of Shakespeare. Weaving a personal story of the 1990s with Shakespeare’s early modern disability narrative, Power’s adaptation reveals that the gender binary was enforced even in queer circles in the 1990s, coding lesbian identities as either butch or femme. The interview concludes with her suggestions for future work in transgender theater based on her collaboration with trans actors beyond *Richard III*.



Dr. Terri Power, author of the acclaimed play *Drag King Richard III*, is a playwright, scholar, and professional theater artist. She has earned a BA in Theater from UCLA, an MFA in Staging Shakespeare, and a PhD in Drama from the University of Exeter in England. Over the years, she has served as the Course Director for the MA in Performing Shakespeare at Bath Spa University and as a Director and Education and Outreach Manager for the Bristol Shakespeare Festival. Her book, *Shakespeare and Gender in Practice* (Palgrave, 2016), argues that cross-gender performance was an integral part of Shakespearean theater, including boy actors playing female roles and the characters who disguise themselves. Taking an intersectional feminist and queer approach, she examines contemporary trends in staging cross-gender performances in the UK and US. The book also looks at how contemporary performance responds to new cultural politics of gender and creates a critical language for understanding that within Shakespeare. A founding member of Stance Theatre Company in the UK, Dr. Power is a contributing scholar to the British Black and Asian Shakespeare project. She spoke to Alexa Alice Joubin about her transgender adaptation of *Richard III*, its reception, and what she would do differently now that our collective vocabulary for gender non-conformity has evolved since the premiere of her play nearly two decades ago.

**Alexa Alice Joubin (AAJ):** You have worked extensively in queer theater. What drew your attention to *Richard III*, a classical disability narrative?

**Terri Power (TP):** I think the play is an excellent example of how Shakespeare’s themes, words, and characters can be appropriated to present contemporary stories and experiences. The concept for my adaptation had developed when, in the United States, I had attended a production of *Richard III* following a phone call with my high school best friend wherein she declared that she was becoming a he. The experience of having that very intimate conversation regarding transitioning and then hearing Richard III reflect on his feeling that he could not prove a lover in a culture that deemed him other, gave the play new meanings. I felt that Shakespeare’s words were echoing a trans experience and that our story, the story of our friendship through transition, could be told through an appropriation of *Richard III*. In 2003, I wrote a play called *Drag King Richard III* as part of my final thesis project toward an MFA in Staging Shakespeare at the University of Exeter in England, in which I offer a transgender interpretation of Shakespeare’s play.

**AAJ:** Could you tell us a little bit about its premiere?

**TP:** *Drag King Richard III* was first publicly presented at the 2004 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Staged upstairs in a small pub, the two-person production drew the attention of critics and audiences despite being one production among thousands that summer. *Drag King Richard III* was one of the first of a new generation of trans narratives, specifically about the trans masculine identity. This complex interweaving of a personal story with Shakespeare’s iconic villain was hugely successful as it drew together queer and mainstream audiences, and allowed space for discussions of trans experience to take center stage.

**AAJ:** That is wonderful to hear. Did the audiences respond differently to your play when it was restaged later?

**TP:** We restaged it in 2013 as part of the Bristol Shakespeare Festival, and again in London a year later. By then, the understanding of trans experiences and representations had shifted, and sociopolitical considerations challenged the artists and their audiences in new ways. *Drag King Richard III*’s themes, story, and resulting discussions remained just as important as when it was presented in 2004, but the play’s representation of the trans experience was, for some queer scholars and critics, dated.

**AAJ:** Could you tell us more about your adaptation itself? What are some of its main themes?

**TP:** Set in the state of Georgia during the late 1980s, my adaptation incorporated a Drag King performance (including a strap-on dildo), nudity, profanity, and a lesbian friendship. The story was told through a mix of my writing and the words of Shakespeare. By appropriating Richard III’s speeches and scenes, I was able to demonstrate how Shakespeare can be read through your theory of trans lens, and at the same time, align trans stories with classical themes.

More specifically, the story is told through the account of La Femme, the best friend of Laurie/Laurence/Richard. La Femme explains to the audience that they were high school best friends and were initially

drawn together because they were lesbians in the homophobic Bible Belt. Years later, Laurie calls La Femme and tells La Femme that she (now he) is transitioning. The play then follows La Femme’s memories of their adolescence together while she wrestles with her friend’s gender change. The story also focuses upon Laurie/Laurence/Richard’s struggles to identify his trans masculinity and loathing of his female anatomy, which is presented through Shakespeare’s *Richard III* text in passages wherein Richard III sees himself as “deformed, unfinished . . . half made up” (1.1.20–21).

**AAJ:** Are there any unique props in the show?

**TP:** In early 2004, in order to begin the rehearsal process, I bought my first prop for the show, a realistic looking strap-on dildo, in the red-light district in Paris. The dildo plays an important role in the production as it represents the other half of Laurence that he feels is missing. It also serves as his sword that he wields to demonstrate his power in his Drag dances and scenes with La Femme, and his symbolic kingly crown that denotes his masculinity through its semiotic representation. Finding the right piece was an important task and luckily, I found the perfect prop for the play at a sex store near the Moulin Rouge. Yes, I had it in my carry-on as I flew back to England and was searched at security. That was quite a moment! C’est la vie!

**AAJ:** How did you cast the production? Did you run into any difficulties in finding trans-identified actors for the main role?

**TP:** Although writing the play was an intense and demanding experience, finding an actor to play the main role of Laurie/Laurence/Richard III was next to impossible. The role requires an actor that is extraordinarily gifted, fearless, willing to shapeshift, and reveal themselves physically and emotionally. It also requires that the actor be comfortable interacting directly with audiences and be able to eloquently recite Shakespeare. Additionally, because this role is based on a real-life person who struggled through transitioning, the lead actor had to play a trans masculine character with a great deal of sensitivity. I looked everywhere in Exeter for such an actor and not one actor came forward to take the role. Not wanting to lose the opportunity to produce the play, I cut off my hair and trained over the course of six months to play the role modeled after my friend rather than the role of La Femme that was representing my voice in real life. Jacqueline White, a peer on the MFA course, took the role of La Femme, playing opposite me.

**AAJ:** While it is important to cast trans-identified actors in trans roles, it could be, in some cases, triggering and traumatizing.

**TP:** I must admit that the role can take a very emotional and psychological toll on the artist. It is imperative that the actor has a solid sense of their own identity and sexuality before playing Laurie/Laurence/Richard III, otherwise they could fall into a deep inner chasm that could potentially be harmful. Because the story hinges on Laurie/Laurence/Richard III’s self-loathing and symptoms of body dysmorphia, the actor

also has to be equally comfortable in their skin so as not to psychologically conflate the character's physical and psychological deconstruction of self with their own external and internal experience.

Additionally, the part is inherently masochistic and hyper-masculine. To fully embody the role before an intimate audience, the actor has to delve into a psychological otherness that is predicated on a discontent of one's bodily form to the point whereby the audience understands why the character would mutilate their bodily parts to inhabit the other. This mutilation of self is also reflected in the structure of the piece that reflects the themes of transition and metamorphosis.

AAJ: What was the rehearsal like in Exeter?

TP: We spent months rehearsing the piece in a tiny studio and hid what we were doing from outside eyes, primarily because we worried we might offend others if they caught a glimpse of me wearing the strap-on and doing my drag dancing in men's underwear. I thought it was the most radical and offensive work I had ever done, and was so frightened yet fascinated by its edges.

Despite my reoccurring anxieties, I just kept working on the performance through rehearsals with Jacqueline, who was far braver than me at the time.

Then when we were nearing our opening night we gave a preview to Professor Phillip Zarrilli (1947–2020) at the University of Exeter. As a theater practitioner, director, and scholar he professed that he hated Shakespeare because, as he suggested, its presentational style often lacked an inner psychological exploration of the human experience, but he wanted to come to support us and give feedback on our performance work. During this rehearsal run he sat on the floor of our tiny rehearsal studio and watched until the end. When it was over, he stood up and said, "That was the best Shakespeare performance I ever saw." Almost fifteen years later, Zarrilli would direct an appropriation entitled *Richard III Redux* written by playwright Kaite O'Reilly performed in venues across Wales in 2018.

AAJ: Thank you for sharing this incredible story. What was the audience's reaction to the premiere?



Figure 1. Terri Power playing Laurence in the *Drag King Richard III* in 2004.

**TP:** One performance was attended by trans-feminist experimental theatre artist Joey Hateley, who took part in our post-performance discussion. Joey is the Artistic Director of TransAction, a theater company in Manchester. I was familiar with Joey’s work and was thrilled to meet them in person. I was flattered when Joey expressed that they liked the show, and then Joey said to me, “If you ever need an actor, I would love to play the lead.” It was there that a seed was planted that wouldn’t develop fully until almost a decade later.

From the very onset of its run in Exeter, *Drag King Richard III* attracted an eclectic audience. Students and teachers from the Department of Drama attended the performances along with students from Classics, English, and Gender Studies. The local LGBTQ community also attended, and often, after shows, audience members wanted to gather in studios and pubs to discuss the work and the issues it presented. I was asked to give talks with audience members and was contacted by attendees, via emails, with questions, requests, and future performance opportunities. For many of our trans and queer audience members this was the first play to represent their experience and they wanted to share that with friends and family members. That’s when I realized the importance of the piece for the LGBTQ and wider communities.

**AAJ:** Your production eventually made its way to Edinburgh. What happened there?

**TP:** In the summer of 2004, Jacqueline and I formed the Shakes-scene Players and entered the play in the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, “the single biggest celebration of arts and culture on the planet.” Although there were thousands of shows listed in the program, I crafted a description of our production that caught the attention of the media before the festival began:

Warning: The show contains nudity, homoeroticism, masochism, transgender politics, drag performance and explicit Shakespearean language. Half autobiography, half classical text, this seductive performance titillates audiences in a cabaret, grab a drink, groundlings style atmosphere. Get ‘DRAGged’ in! (Fringe Program, 2004)

I thought I was being clever by writing this description for the program. I aimed to get us noticed among the thousands of other productions and events, including over a hundred other Shakespeare based performances. However, I wasn’t prepared for my tongue-in-cheek program narrative to generate such a buzz in the media pre-festival.

**AAJ:** That is a witty description, especially the line about “explicit Shakespearean language.”

**TP:** Our little production had the attention of the press months before the start of the festival and when we opened the show upstairs in, yet again, a tiny studio space above the Meadow Bar, it was packed with audience members and festival reviewers. The bigger picture was painted in bold strokes that evening as I recognized how my personal story was now being very publicly and therefore politically presented.

Our premiere at the Fringe Festival was a critical success. Audiences and the press gave us outstanding reviews. Claire Smith of *The Scotsman* wrote, “Don’t be misled by the title, or the description in the Fringe programme, which makes this sound like a gay burlesque show. This is an excellent piece of theatre” and “the central story is movingly and eloquently brought to life.” Thom Dibdin of *The Stage* wrote that it was, “A small production which asks very big questions” and praised the writing: “Power’s script examines reactions to a [trans] friend” and “dares to express fear and selfishness about the change, before accepting it.” The production was honored as one of the U Win Tin Freedom of Expression Award Commended Productions by Amnesty International Scotland.

As with our previous run in Exeter, audience members regularly stayed after the performance and waited for us to descend the steps to the downstairs bar. They applauded us and bought us drinks and food in an attempt to continue the discussion they felt had been prompted by the performance. They wanted to share their stories, or to talk through issues they or their family members were facing. These stories ranged from their own experience of coming out to just asking advice on how to best support a queer-identified loved one.

**AAJ:** Could you give us an example of these conversations, excising any personally identifiable information to protect the audiences’ privacy?

**TP:** For example, one evening at the Meadow Bar, an American woman in her sixties bought me a drink and told me that she had a gay son. He had never admitted that he was gay and seemed too ashamed to come out to her. She told me that she knew he had a long-term partner but that he never brought him to their family home. She felt she didn’t see him much as a result of his hidden life and missed him dearly during holidays and special family events. She asked me what she should do. I told her to take him to lunch and let him know that she loved and accepted him unconditionally. To let him know that she wanted to be part of his life and that she was proud of him and all he had accomplished in his life. Then it would be up to him to share his full life with her when he was ready. I also told her that part of his fear could stem from a feeling of rejection. Perhaps not all the family would love him unconditionally and therefore he kept parts of his life hidden.

**AAJ:** What about audiences that identify with cisgender or normative sexuality? What do you wish to accomplish?

**TP:** It was clear to me that weaving Shakespeare’s words with this personal story of gender transition made the underlying discussion of identity and experience accessible to cisgender and conservative family and friends.

However, this accessibility and the popularity of the show came at a cost. While audience members routinely thanked me for presenting a story of transgender experience and explained that they felt they un-

derstood the issues faced by transgendered people, the play wasn't a representation of all transgender experience, but rather of one person's gendered transition as told from the perspective of a non-trans friend.

**AAJ:** Could you tell us about subsequent revivals of *Drag King Richard III* in 2004?

**TP:** In an effort to address what I felt was a necessary extension of the show, I booked our 2004–2005 UK tour to include performances at universities and in LGBTQ-inclusive spaces with post-performance discussions. Shake-scene Players returned to Edinburgh Fringe in 2005. Unfortunately, the Shake-scene Players started to fall apart soon after. I was working in New York on my PhD and wasn't able to oversee the touring production. In late 2005, I received complaint emails regarding the cast of *Drag King Richard III* making insensitive remarks regarding the LGBTQ community while resident in LGBTQ centers. I felt it necessary that *Drag King Richard III* be led by an LGBTQ presence.

**AAJ:** What changes did you make to the show's 2013 revival?

**TP:** In 2013 while serving as the Education and Outreach Director for the Bristol Shakespeare Festival, I had an opportunity to partner with the Bristol Pride annual event. I decided to dust off *Drag King Richard III*. The production sparked a new wave of inspiration. I gave royalty-free permission for the use of the play and donated my services as playwright and dramaturge. I knew that in approaching the restaging of *Drag King Richard III* we should make our best effort to cast a trans actor in the lead role and create post-performance discussions with audiences to address the shifts in our understanding of transgender representations and politics. In other words, I wanted to publicly acknowledge the limited scope of the personal story and state that the issues presented in the play were a decade old. Roz Hopkinson took the director's chair, and I suggested Joey Hateley for the lead role. We also secured a dream team of transgender scholars and artists, led by Dr. Lazlo Pearlman of Santa Clara University, to help contemporize the post-performance discussions with our audiences.

**AAJ:** For those who are interested, Dr. Power has generously shared a video of her 2013 production: <https://vimeo.com/82283504>

**TP:** After the show one evening, one audience member reflected on the composition of the audience in attendance: "It's actually so warming to be amongst straight people tonight, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and it's quite nice that a play has actually conjured up such a diverse audience." Another described the importance of the experience in opening up dialogues about queer experiences, "I think that the play was absolutely excellent at reaching a mainstream audience. I would love my parents to see it and lots of friends. I think it's very accessible. And I feel that seeing the play is really important for people that haven't ever engaged with that agenda. It's a first step."

**AAJ:** Are there different voices?

**TP:** A few trans artists, such as Hateley, maintained that the play’s themes were dated. They believed that the scope of the discussion was limited by its focus on binary representations of gender identity. I could recognize how entrenched the play was in this limited view of the human experience, but at the same time, I could also see how that limited scope was far more identifiable and palatable for cisgender communities’ first encounter with this discourse. The question became: Should I throw the proverbial binary baby out with the bath water because our understanding had evolved?

**AAJ:** What were your responses? How did they evolve over time?

**TP:** The scholar in me aimed to present a broader, and therefore more inclusive, picture of gender, sexuality, and identity representation, and yet, the playwright in me wanted to protect the work as a reflective product of its time and place when it was first written. This helped to both engage audiences in the immediate discourse and allow the freedom of a necessary contemporary critique of the trans scripts we present both on stage and off in our sociocultural narratives regarding queer lives.

However, facilitating such an approach as both playwright and transgender studies scholar required personal sacrifices and emotional distancing from my own artistic work that was no easy path to traverse. From its inception, *Drag King Richard III* was critically scrutinized, with its themes excruciatingly dissected. Although most of the criticism it drew from the press and public had positive effects, there were instances of harsh reflections, suggestions, and reviews.

A decade earlier, in the play’s infancy, I had taken these critiques personally. In an interview with Jacqueline Sharp in 2005, I addressed the negative criticism the play received during its return run at the Fringe Festival. I felt that, instead of accepting that “Shakespeare and gender in *Drag King Richard III* are a package,” my critics focused on how “the friendship had not developed” or the question of “where does Richard III come into it.” My responses to these critiques, at the time, were reactionary and defensive. I felt that they targeted the experimental nature of the work. I wasn’t able to accept these perspectives and grow from such differing opinions.

By 2013, I was able to distance myself as an artist from the work. I had emerged from a state of artistic defense to one capable of inciting debate and provocation with audiences. I adopted the position that if art doesn’t evoke passionate response in its audience, positive or negative, then it has not done its job. As Bertolt Brecht stated, “Art is not a mirror to hold up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it.”

**AAJ:** Were you able to re-stage the play with these revisions?

**TP:** Taking lessons we learned in Bristol, Roz Hopkinson and I formed the Stance Theatre Company in 2013, and secured Arts Council England funding to remount the play in London. Staged at the Riverside Studios in the summer of 2014, each performance was followed by an open Q&A session with artists and

audiences led by either trans artist/scholar/activist Del La Grace Volcano or writer Laura Bridgeman. Laura Seymour of *Exeunt Magazine* reported that “the audience was especially attentive to the play’s status as more of (as one participant called it) a period piece, able to provide the first steps in informing audiences about trans issues without necessarily capturing current development in trans culture and politics.” I would venture to say that, taking a cue from David James’ review in *London City Night*, the post-show discussion was “as fascinating as the play itself.”

**AAJ:** In what sense is your play a period piece?

**TP:** The play reflects late 1980s and early 1990s views of gender. Its setting, rural Georgia, means that the gender binary was strictly coded and enforced, even within queer circles. The lesbian community I was part of at that time either defined our gender identities as butch or femme, which is why this ideology is given such emphasis in the play. Staging the play today, it is important to contextualize this to audiences so that they understand that we have moved our understanding much further along.

Presently, we understand far more about lived experiences of gender and the diversity of those experiences than in the past. Today, thanks to trans and queer communities, we speak not about gender in binary terms but rather in non-binary terms, recognizing that gender is a fluid spectrum of individual experience.

**AAJ:** Looking ahead, what would you say is the future for transgender performance?

**TP:** The Transgender Shakespeare Company was founded in London in 2015, “the world’s first Shakespeare company run entirely by and for transgender artists,” according to their website. It is significant that the company was supported by crowd-sourced funding through Kickstarter and events such as their inaugural workshop led by Jack Doyle and Robin Craig. During the first workshop, participants were taught voice and movement techniques used by trans actors over a two-hour period. They also held a workshop for “trans-identified actors.” Despite what appears to be a great start, sadly the company fell silent after a few smaller events held in 2016. Creating such companies and productions can be a daunting task given the depleting and therefore competitive landscape of funding for the arts in both North America and the UK.

We can effect changes together. I have been part of a diversity movement in the arts in England to demand changes to traditional stagings and castings of Shakespeare. Most of my work in the field was held in academic and artistic forums, and with many collaborators and schemes such as the British Black and Asian Shakespeare project. We collectively placed pressure on Arts Council England, as well as Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, The National Theatre, and the Royal Shakespeare Company to present a fair and diverse reflection on the stage of the composition of the British public.

I am happy to report we have been successful in manifesting those changes. Even in the US many professional, regional, and national theater companies have overhauled their casting approach to demonstrate greater inclusion and diversity.

However, the residual effect is that smaller, niche, upstart companies, such as the Transgender Shakespeare Company and my own Stance Theatre Company, are often overlooked when artistic funds are being distributed. A far larger and more established theater company, that has a larger audience base and demonstrates a mission toward diverse programming, often receives the lion's share of the available funds as they are a far more secure bet in an insecure market. Seeking external funding from sources such as Kickstarter is a possibility for smaller ventures, but it is not a stable source of revenue and can be exhausting for artists to manage and maintain. Over the last few years, I've watched these brave hardworking companies form and disappear, and it is heartbreaking.

**AAJ:** We can be cautiously optimistic about the future of transgender theater.

**TP:** I am elated when I read news reports like the 2015 Oregon court ruling of a legal change to gender as non-binary and articles advocating trans-focused projects such as The Non-binary Monologue Project at the University of Colorado in 2017 (<https://nonbinarymonologues.wordpress.com/>). The project, led by K. Woodzick, created an online database of more than 100 monologues by 50 playwrights for non-binary, transgender, and gender non-conforming actors. According to the article, the database contains, “more than 100 monologues by over 50 playwrights.”

**AAJ:** That is a timely project. Is Shakespeare part of the database?

**TP:** Shakespeare's works are not yet found on the site, but they are planning to include classical monologues in the future. Eventually this will be an outstanding resource for artists that choose to join companies and audition for projects outside of their smaller artistic circles. It will propel artists forward.

**AAJ:** What is the future for transgender Shakespeare?

**TP:** Having produced *Drag King Richard III* across the decades, I learned many valuable lessons and have had my share of successes and failures. When it comes to Shakespeare and trans visibility and representation, there is still so much work to be done. We have to ceaselessly push boundaries, demand established companies to redress the canon, create our own works and companies, promote fringe and niche LGBTQ projects, and be ready to hold tough discussions with our audiences and critics. Shakespearean theater still does not fully present or reflect trans lives. Despite some leaps forward, we are still in the winter of trans invisibility, and it is time that we made trans lives a “glorious summer” by placing their stories in the spotlight. Forget holding a mirror up to nature. It is time to grab a proverbial hammer, or a dildo, and wield it.