

❖ Dubiously wholesome: performing gender

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In preparation for an aerial performance at a high profile fundraiser with a burlesque theme, I laid out my costume, cosmetics and various other accessories. First I blurred away the imperfections on my face with foundation, applied copious amounts of eye make-up including an outrageous set of false eyelashes and ensured everyone in the audience would be able to see my lips by coating them in a fire engine shade of red. I stacked my hair high on top of my head and secured it with a thick layer of hairspray, added sparkles to every surface of my body possible and finally donned the skimpy leotard provided for me to wear. I studied my appearance in the mirror: I would pass as femininely beautiful.

Just as I was jumping up to see the lower half of my body in the mirror (I am rather short, and the mirror was just that little bit too high) I walked four of the dancers who were due to perform after the act I would be in. They were the epitome of the feminine ideal: legs that ran up almost to my shoulders, hourglass figures fitted into alluring burlesque costumes adorned with feathers and sequins, and perfect hair and perfect make-up that made my rendition of the guise look like I was in drag. So there I was; contemplating my inadequacies while being dwarfed by four perfect examples of the very feminine ideal I was trying to achieve.

All I could see in the mirror was an undersized, boyish body that at best could be described as short and stocky compared to the 'glamazon' that surrounded me. Even my costume fell short of the mark: it had to be constrained in its lavishness so as not to be impractical during my performance. As they filed out, the last remaining dancer took one last look at her reflection and said to it, "you're gorgeous" as she glided out the door. As I walked awkwardly into the limelight on my way out to the aerial apparatus, I hoped no-one would notice my lack of feminine perfection. Once in the air, this could easily be made up for in the practiced feminine movements of my performance.

But at this moment I was faced with the irony that something I loved and made me feel powerful and strong could, for the sake of an audience, also cause feelings of gendered inadequacies. As 'Hey Big Spender', my cue, started to play over the sound system, I turned to my co-performer with a crooked smile and said, "I'm gorgeous", then tried to glide gracefully onto the stage.

My experiences as a professional aerial performer and the contrasting standards of gendered ideals in this area raised personal questions of what it means to identify as female in

contemporary society, and how manifestations of gender are used to create an identity that interacts with the complexities of everyday life. In considering these questions, Judith Butler's ideas of gender as a scripted social performance appealed to me, and my project centred itself on the question of how I could explore ideas of gender performance through my artist practice. To research this question, my work revolved around a process of working with aerial acrobatics and digital media, which resulted in a series of video works. This process acted as both an aesthetic tool and a research methodology, where my experience as a female aerial performer informed my conceptual framework alongside the project's engagement with literature on gender identity. In combination with the aesthetics of my aerial/video works, I integrated suggestions of perverted fairytales, using the tales as social commentaries and manipulators to subvert accepted views on gender roles.

A wolf, eaten or saved

A Wolf, Eaten or Saved expresses the ambiguity and the fine lines between body, sex, gender and agency in the process of gendering self. I have used key elements of the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* in this work to symbolically represent the components used when constructing a gendered identity.

In this work, the character of *Little Red Riding Hood* represents the individual or performer; the forest becomes the threat of punishment for performing gender incorrectly (the potential to be eaten); the wolf equals the interpretations and/or aspects of gendering the self that do not adhere to designated norm, or in Butler's words "gender trouble"¹; the path through the woods embodies performing gender correctly or the gendered ideal; the Mother epitomises the force of social conscription; and Grandmother is the repetition and rehearsal of Butler's gendered scripts.

Setting up the scene for *Little Red Riding Hood's* ordeal is a forest made up of passive aerial bodies, hooded and attired in skin-coloured fabric, dangling by their arms and legs which are caught up in red fabric. The image scrolls across the screen to reveal a path cutting through the forest of punished bodies. Moving along the path are cloned, black and white aerial performers being manipulated, puppet-like, in perfect synchronisation by a large hand. The hand is representative of the Mother figure in the story. *Little Red Riding Hood* enters the scene dressed in brilliant red in contrast to the black and white aesthetics of her surroundings.

She performs a similar routine, yet embellishes it by twisting the fabric around her legs rather than staying still in the splits, which causes her to become tangled in the fabric, and the performance to become disjointed and unrefined in comparison to the clones seen previously. Finally, after failing to execute the designated routine, *Little Red Riding Hood* slides off the red fabric and leaves in search of an alternative to the reparations routine played out on the red fabric. In these scenes, the viewer is presented with the ideal: the aerial clones to which the protagonist should aspire. The potential consequence of failing to achieve this ideal is represented by the trapped isolation of the forest's aerial bodies, and sets up *Little Red Riding Hood's* desire to leave behind the repressive aspects of her gendered identity. In the final moment of her gendered performance, *Little Red Riding Hood*, controlled by an outside force, untangles herself from the gender signifying fabric and leaves the path.

The scene scrolls again to reveal the wolf made up of fur and bits of masculine and feminine aerial bodies. This realisation of the wolf was born out of a previous work titled *Pretty Monsters* (2007) where a single form was created by the mixing of the body parts from masculine and feminine aerialists performing a duo routine. Each piece of the gender monster shifted with slow and subtle movements creating a pulsating form that gave the strange body life. The movements also create an ambiguity to the body parts as they merge together and then

separate.

The manipulation of the aerial performance created a Rorschach display of beaks and eyes that generated a disturbing image the viewer could never accept as a reality. It alluded to the non-acceptance of unusual interpretations of gender scripts and that an ambiguous gender identity can be disturbing and confusing in an everyday setting. The gender monsters are not a mask and do not suggest an inner core of a true instigator of gender identity, rather its compilation acts to contradict the signification of a true inner core that is suggested by the performance of socially constructed actions and gestures.² By making the wolf follow a similar aesthetic, it was my intention to set up the wolf as representative of the greys found in the black and white categories of binary gendered norms. In the earlier versions of *Little Red Riding Hood*, particularly around the 1700s, the wolf tricked Little Red Riding Hood into eating and drinking her grandmother's flesh and blood.³

I have used this aspect of the story to represent the process of destabilising gender ideals through the subversive repetition of gendered signifiers. The wolf, by tricking Little Red Riding Hood into consuming the aerial clones and the forest aerial bodies, sets up a situation where these ideals are part of Little Red Riding Hood's conception of her performance but are longer in a position of power to govern Little Red Riding Hood's iteration of these scripts.

In this rendition of *Little Red Riding Hood* I have incorporated three of the four most prevalent endings to the tale and used them to make up the title of the work, *A Wolf, Eaten or Saved*. Little Red Riding Hood is either eaten, saved by the huntsman or becomes the wolf.⁴ Each ending represents a different conclusion in the process of subverting gender norms. In the first of the three endings Little Red Riding Hood ends up being eaten.⁵

In *A Wolf, Eaten or Saved*, Little Red Riding Hood is symbolically eaten through a process of her transformation into one of the forest aerial bodies. It begins by Little Red Riding Hood climbing into the wolf's mouth via a white piece of fabric suspended from the wolf's jaw in order to resemble one of its fangs. The aerial performer encases herself in the white fabric to form a cocoon which turns red on completion.

When Little Red Riding Hood emerges from the pod, she is wearing the skin-coloured body suit like the other forest aerial bodies. After she has fully emerged from the cocoon, Little Red Riding Hood falls, her ankles becoming tangled in the red fabric. At this moment, the wolf's mouth fades then the forest also fades into the background, incorporating Little Red Riding Hood into its ranks of aerial bodies. In this version of the ending, the individual is punished for performing gender incorrectly through isolation and abject control. It illustrates the excuse of biological assumptions for the justification of its punishment, represented by the minimal presentation of aerial bodies; however, the bodies are still suspended by the red fabric, making a lie out of the body's status as a neutral sight for social inscription.

The next ending played out in *A Wolf, Eaten or Saved* is when Little Red Riding Hood is saved from the consequence of being eaten and reconditioned to avoid being eaten again. This the most recognised version of the ending, made popular by the Brothers Grimm⁶.

In this version, the huntsman characterises a fatherly, masculine hero who rescues a girl child from the consequence of her disobedience and, in Orenstein's words, "gives her a second chance to walk the straight path through life."⁷ This time, in my rendition of the tale, when Little Red Riding Hood climbs up the white fabric, a giant hand swoops down and removes her from the wolf's jaws.

As the hand grasps the fabric Little Red Riding Hood turns from brilliant red to black and white,

beginning her conversion into one of the aerial clones seen gliding along the path at the beginning of the work. This image, although rescuing Little Red Riding Hood from the abject forest, takes away her agency in constructing her gendered identity.

The final ending given to *A Wolf, Eaten or Saved* transforms Little Red Riding Hood into the wolf. In English novelist Angela Carter's version of the tale, *The Company of Wolves*⁸, Little Red Riding Hood's sexual appetite outdoes that of the wolf, causing him to be fearful, ultimately reversing the gender roles usually portrayed in earlier versions of the story, and suggests Little Red Riding Hood has transformed into a wolf herself. In the movie based on Carter's version, similarly titled *The Company of Wolves*, Little Red Riding Hood's family arrives at their grandmother's house to save their daughter, only to be presented with two wolves instead, one of which the mother figure recognises as her daughter. I use this ending, and the images it conjures, to relay Little Red Riding Hood's subversion of gendered ideals in a way that empowers her, rather than forcing her into a social exile. The final image in *A Wolf, Eaten or Saved*, shows Little Red Riding Hood performing an aerial routine where the red of the fabric has been replaced by the fur, face and teeth of the wolf, giving the impression Little Red Riding Hood is wrapping herself in the signifying aspects of the wolf. Although Little Red Riding Hood is still performing her gender, the rules have been changed and the trap is being worked to subvert the repressive gender ideals and the punishment dealt for not aspiring to this ideal.

Footnotes

1 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.

2 The idea that an inner core is a fantasy produced by signifying actions and gestures comes from Butler's 'Gender Trouble'. She writes 'In other words, acts gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through a play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause.'

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006. p185.

3 This version of *Little Red Riding Hood* came from; Darnton, Robert. "Peasants Tell Tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose." In *The Great Cat Massacre And Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, 9-72. New York: Random House, 1984.

4 The other ending, which I have not used for conceptual reasons, is where Little Red Riding Hood tricks the wolf and saves herself.

5 This extract was taken from the first version of *Little Red Riding Hood* by Charles Perrault published

in 1697. I sourced it from: Zipes, Jack. *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood: Versions of the Tale in Sociocultural Context*. 2 ed. London: Routledge, 1993.

6 Grimm, J.L.C. and Grimm, W.C. *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993.

7 Orenstein, Catherine. *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked*. New York: Basic Books, 2002. p46.

8 Carter, Angela. "The Company of Wolves." In *The Bloody Chamber*, 142-52. New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc, 1979. 153

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