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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ  
**Call Me Madam Speaker:**  
***THE CONGRESSLADIES, A POLITICAL BURLESQUE***

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THEATER ARTS

by

Sunee Kiernan

June 2015

The Thesis of Sunee Kiernan is  
approved by:

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## **Abstract**

### **Call Me Madam Speaker: *THE CONGRESSLADIES, A POLITICAL BURLESQUE***

**Sunee Kiernan**

The following paper discusses my preparation for and execution of the role of Nancy in the University of California at Santa Cruz's 2015 production of *The Congressladies*, an adaptation of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*. During this process there were questions that continually resurfaced. Why do people enjoy watching and performing political satire, an art form that has tenaciously persisted from Ancient Greece until now? If our ensemble was writing song parodies to critique current events, why adapt Aristophanes' 2400 year old play, instead of writing a new show altogether? What is the importance of actors in political satire? Through my research and performance, I was able to deeply engage with these questions. I will discuss this research, the intensely collaborative rehearsal process, and the execution of my role. Additionally, I will touch upon the *Congressladies*' reception by its audiences.

## UCDC

During my senior year as an undergraduate, I traveled to Washington DC for the UCDC Arts Focus Program. UCDC provided me with an opportunity to spend a quarter studying and interning in the Washington DC Metropolitan Area. I took a class called Politics and Theater, taught by my long-time mentor and teacher Danny Scheie. Our class attended performances, ranging from Shakespeare's *Richard III* at the Folger, to Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* at Arena Stage. We also traveled to the Ronald Reagan building to watch the Capitol Steps. What unfolded was a high energy, slapstick burlesque of politicians and current events. The Capitol Steps are hilarious because they mock what is powerful and immediate to their audience: Washington DC, the center of American politics. The program read that many of the performers had worked day jobs in the capital, granting them the satisfaction of "[satirizing] the very people and places that employed them" (*About the Capitol Steps*). Through laughter, the audience and performers seemed to feel a sense of community while enjoying a cathartic release. I left the performance that night wondering: how had I never been in a political burlesque?

When I was not in class, I worked as an intern for Theater J, a professional and political theater company that has been producing shows since it was founded in 1990. They have been acclaimed by the New York Times as "The Premiere Theater for Premiers... A rare blend of professional polish, thoughtful drama, and nervy experimentation" ("About Theater J," n.d.). I chose to work with Theater J because of

my growing fascination with political theater; I wanted see firsthand how Theater J created relationships with individuals and their community.

Theater J produced David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* and brought in Hwang opening weekend for a post-show discussion with the audience. Throughout the discussion people kept smiling and laughing; there was a jovial atmosphere in the theater. This atmosphere was possible because *Yellow Face* is a play that presents sociopolitical issues in a *comic* way; conversation around subjects such as gender and race in our culture is often serious, but here an audience could relax and laugh while still thinking about these pressing issues.

I flew back to California to finish the school year, inspired by what I had seen. My time in Washington DC inspired me to continue engaging in political theater, ideally through comedy. In my final quarter as an undergraduate, I was accepted into UCSC's Master of Arts Graduate Program. Exactly a year after watching the Capitol Steps and working with Theater J, I would receive the part of Nancy Pelosi in *The Congressladies*, a political burlesque set in Washington DC.

## **The First Meeting**

At the beginning of fall quarter, I met with Professor Danny Scheie to discuss thesis options. We established that I had the makings of a strong character actor, and that Mary Kay Gamel's working adaptation of *Ecclesiazusae* would be an ideal opportunity to explore and present my work. This production would be, in the words of Scheie, "something raunchy, political, feminist and totally up my alley".

While I was unfamiliar with Aristophanes' plays, my past experience with political and feminist theater served as a means through which I could effectively commit to this production. A role in an Aristophanic comedy was an exciting opportunity to combine an exploration of political satire and character acting. I would also engage with my colleagues in a highly collaborative process; this ensemble would write political sketches and song parodies. Scheie would tentatively offer me a role in the show, but he could not foresee what this role would be; the script was not finished, and the new characters would be based on who got cast. My instructions were to read *Ecclesiazusae* and pick three roles that I would be interested in playing. I would continue delving into Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*; I had to get a better sense of what I was getting myself into.



## Translations

My work began by reading and researching different translations of *Ecclesiazusae*. I read both the 1998 translation by Alan Sommerstein, as well as the 2010 translation by Jeffrey Henderson. I did not care for Sommerstein's translation; I didn't connect with the language or find the story funny, which felt frustrating. Many of the jokes were lost on me, and the characters struck me as antiquated and two-dimensional. When reading Henderson's translation, I found the writing style to be accessible and the footnotes remarkably helpful to my comprehension. By reading these translations I could speculate on what the foundation of our production would be textually and thematically built. In truth, one of my first questions was: if we were writing song parodies and sketches to critique current events, why adapt Aristophanes' 2400 year old play? Why not write a new show entirely? As David Wiles eloquently says, "History can never be objective. As a way of establishing meaningful links between bits of data, we tell stories about the past, and those stories reflect how we see our own world... Each modern performance embodies a new understanding of the past, and offers a new perspective" (2). By using *Ecclesiazusae* as a foundation for our show, we can acknowledge deep common references to our past and our theatrical roots in Greek culture, but still create and present politically charged theater that matters to us now.

*Ecclesiazusae* served the ensemble, playwright and director as a point of departure into an original adaptation. In the end, *The Congressladies* had taken on a life of its own. Wiles writes that Greek plays "have so many possibilities. They can

be handled as movement pieces, performance poetry or intellectual arguments. They confront themes like war, gender, democracy and the limits of materialism which seem to matter in the present” (3). By discussing the themes in *Ecclesiazusae*, we shine a light on what issues still hold our attention. Our production of *Congressladies* has closed, and I can assuredly say that Aristophanes provided our ensemble with a backbone off of which to collectively build and voice modern hot-button issues.

### **A Look To Our Past**

Learning the historical context in which *Ecclesiazusae* was performed helped me understand the setting which Aristophanes aimed to mock. I frequently sought out our show’s dramaturge, Richard Rossi, to discuss the history and politics of Athens. The translations I read included valuable information as well. Jeffrey Henderson’s translation, called *Assemblywomen*, provided me with some key historical points.

Henderson writes:

“Two oligarchic regimes had replaced the democracy, first in the summer of 411 and then immediately following the war, and after they had restored democracy the Athenians had made changes in their constitution in the hope of eliminating the most irresponsible features of full popular sovereignty, on which many blamed the loss of the war...The political crisis and constitutional reforms, in combination with a revitalized assembly, had stimulated the Athenians to discuss and debate their democratic systems afresh, and had also

stimulated theoretical speculation about various ideal system of government.

*Assemblywomen* is a reflection of such speculation in comic terms” (148).

Political satire mocks the faults of its government, but does not offer a solution for these faults. The women successfully take over the polis in hopes of establishing a communal utopia, through which Aristophanes “confronts his audience with the limits of their own public-spiritedness, with the insidious potential of personal greed and self-interest to undercut political solutions to social ills. With the destruction of the elite of wealth, he implies, the Athenians might be victimized by an elite of the clever and unscrupulous” (Ober and Strauss, 266). Aristophanes was not offering gynarchy as a political solution, nor did his audience consider that as a possibility. Jeffrey Henderson writes that “[among] Old Comedy’s carnivalesque legacies are its hero[ine]s, who typically represent marginal or powerless groups; its utopian inversion of the status quo; and its criticism of the system and its official enforces” (9). *The Congressladies* was an all-inclusive cast, a testimonial that a person of any sex, race, religion or age can write and perform political satire in our society. The Congresswomen we played were inspired from real politicians, unlike the women in *Ecclesiazusae*. If we presented gynarchy as a solution to *our* political problems, would a modern audience take it seriously?

The roles of Athenian women and men were vastly different; a woman’s place was limited to the household and her relationship to community was through ritual, while the “place of [men] became the market, the assembly, the law court, the

gymnasium where they conversed and trained for war, and the theater where they questioned in the most fundamental ways who they were and how they should live" (Wiles, 69). *Ecclesiazusae* plays upon these gender differences in order to explore these political tensions; it is not a play advocating for equality of the sexes. If a failed gynarchy was used as a plot device to critique government mishaps, how could this play be viewed as "feminist" now?

### **Adapting Aristophanic Comedy**

***"If you just let a play speak, it may not make a sound. If what you want is for the play to be heard, then you must conjure its sound from it."* -Peter Brook**

Attempting to reconstruct *Ecclesiazusae* in the spirit of its original intent would be to miss the point of Aristophanic comedy. The spirit of Aristophanic humor lies in its critique of current political and social milieu. While we might think that an audience of seasoned Greek classicists would understand the jokes meant to be hurled at Athenian politicians, a modern audience would fall silent. We cannot satirize topical issues by attempting to reconstruct and present *Ecclesiazusae* as it would have been in the Athenian world. An example of such a misfired joke to a contemporary audience could be when Second Woman points directly into the audience to blame a man, Epigonus, for her blundered rhetoric:

"SECOND WOMAN: Give me the garland. I'm going to have another turn at speaking. I think I've practiced it properly now. [*Mounting the platform, and putting on the first garland*] In my opinion, ladies of the Assembly-

PRAXAGORA: Again, you wretch? You're calling the men "ladies"!

SECOND WOMAN [*pointing into audience*]: That was because of Epigonus over there. I looked over that way, and it made me think I was speaking to women" (Henderson, 161).

Henderson says that "a man with this rare name is listed in a roughly contemporary inscription among the female members of a cult association" (240). For modern audiences, there is little hope of this joke landing. The citizens' names would not be recognized by modern audiences, nor would the cultural references. In the prologue, Praxagora asks the women "...have you done all the things that we resolved on at the Scira?" (Sommerstein, 49). Aristophanes' reference to the Skirophoria, a festival in which exclusively women participated, functions to exploit the stereotype of wives as deceptive and alludes to the switching of social roles in the eventual coup d'état of the polis. While this would be understood by Athenians, it is yet another reference that would be lost on a modern audience.

*Ecclesiazusae* was undoubtedly a political satire that commented on the present state of its Athenian audience. The references in political satire have difficulty translating over the years because they are era-specific; its ability to amuse lies in the immediate connection audiences make to current events. To adapt *Ecclesiazusae* would mean that we could keep the structure of the plot, omit the Athenian references, and create our own. My job as an actor was to be a well-informed citizen, by staying in the "now" of my sociopolitical context.

Two events made international headlines which felt very relevant to my work in *The Congressladies*. In June of 2014, the North Korean government threatened action against the United States if they allowed the release of a film called *The*

*Interview*, a political satire in which two journalists, played by James Franco and Seth Rogen, are instructed to assassinate Kim Jong-Un. Scott Neuman from National Public Radio writes:

“To be sure, the plot hits a little close to home – especially for a secretive and paranoid regime...The country’s official KCNA news service calls the actors ‘gangster filmmakers’ and said that if the U.S. government allowed the release of the movie, Pyongyang would consider it an ‘act of war.’ A Foreign Ministry official quoted by KNCA berated the movie as ‘reckless U.S. provocative insanity’ that spawned a ‘gust of hatred and rage’ among the people of North Korea. ‘The act of making and screening such a movie that portrays an attack on our top leadership...is a most wanton act of terror and act of war, and is absolutely intolerable,’ the official said” (Neuman).

Then in early January of 2015, a mass shooting occurred in the offices of Charlie Hedbo; gunmen forced their way into the building and killed 12 people. This seemed bewildering: that harmless sketches or a film would provoke such violent responses. Satire usually makes us laugh, it is used as a playful way of getting issues into the open so people can talk about them. However, when those in power are pricked by the satirist’s needle, they feel their ego deflate and authority challenged. This is what *The Congressladies* ensemble, as actors in a political burlesque, as impersonators of politicians, as song writers, got to do: Challenge what we find politically and socially corrupt by ridiculing it. As the Charlie Hedbo and *The Interview* headlines surfaced,

and while we wrote our own political burlesque, the spirit of Aristophanes' comedy remained pervasive.

## Praxagora

*“Praxagora: Immensely charismatic. Penetratingly insightful. Intensely seductive. Think Maggie the Cat meets Ethel Merman.” -Josie Nordman*

Praxagora, the spearhead of the polis' coup d'etat, immediately stood out as a desirable part to play. She struck me as a revolutionary heroine; a leading suffragette with an intrepid nature. Additionally, there were aspects of Praxagora that left me with questions. Why had she been in exile with her husband? Why does she leave half way into the play? How would her stereotypes of gender function in a modern context? I also noted that her role had no preconceived notion of grandeur, such as Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth or Edward Albee's Martha. An actor who plays her wouldn't have to face the fear that many actors do when taking on a well-known part.

From the moment she enters the play, she presents herself as a skilled actress and inspiring teacher. Through her speeches and dialogue with other characters, she demonstrates that political rhetoric and gender are performances, both can be imitated and used to manipulate others. This is especially apparent in the prologue, where she acts as a performance coach for her colleagues:

“First Woman: But how can a congregation of women, with women's minds, expect to address the people?”

Praxagora: Much better than anybody, that's how! They say that the young men who've been reamed the most are also the most effective orators! And as luck would have it, that's exactly what nature suits us for!

First Woman: I'm not so sure: inexperience is a dangerous thing.

Praxagora: Well, isn't that why we've gathered here, to practice what we're going to say there? Come on, attach your beard; [to other women] and that goes for everyone else who's been practicing how to gab" (Henderson, 159-160).



Praxagora certainly has the credentials for instructing her colleagues on the nature of disguise. Throughout the play she transforms with ease, from commander-in-chief to male orator to dutiful wife.

Praxagora presents any actor with ample opportunities to create clear objectives and stakes which drive her through the play. In the prologue, for example, she watches the women rehearse and discovers that her plan might not work because everyone is fumbling up their lines. Praxagora is confident in herself, but the women need to be completely disguised as well, or everything will fall apart. She is nervous to enter the polis with women who lack her persuasive ability, but she has to work through her doubt. It is absolutely necessary that she coaches these women correctly, or risk being punished if they are found out. Ismene Lada-Richards demonstrates that in this way, Praxagora acts as a Stanislavskian director:

“[She] insists that complete and successful adjustment to the role is a long preliminary process, which cannot be effected *ex abrupto* on the stage...Equally ‘Stanislavskian’ is Praxagora’s insistence on the need for utmost self-control and absolute self-discipline, so that no jarring elements intrude in the performance and so that even the ‘tiniest...fraction’ of the part is rendered with absolute precision...above everything else, Praxagora understands that her most thorny problem is that of *inner* congruence and adjustment...[she] is anxious to impress upon her cast that a good impersonation does not merely depend on outer assimilation but is primarily a

function of creating one's role in internal and harmonious correspondence to the character who lies behind it" (403-405).

In every scene and with every character with which Praxagora interacted, she always appeared to have a clear motive and to be in control. When this scene was adapted into our script, and I discovered that these Praxagora's mentality was very similar to that which I created for Nancy.

## The Actor's Approach

***“The instinct of the modern western actor is to transmit the pain of a unique individual called Medea through the face. The masked Greek actor used the body to demonstrate a set of impulses...” -David Wiles***

A conspicuous point of difference that emerges when adapting Aristophanic comedy is the actor's practice and presentation. There are fundamental differences between the acting conventions of ancient Greek and modern Western actors; historical artifacts provide images of costume and gestures which, if reconstructed, would appear antiquated to modern society. David Wiles writes:

“The actors of comedy wore flesh-coloured tights to simulate nakedness, and a large phallus was sewn on the tights of males...Other features of the male body in comedy include breasts, a padded stomach and padded buttocks, and the shoulders are hunched, eliminating the divide between body and mask. The human being becomes a single organism, for comedy regards people as creatures who gratify themselves through talking (large mouth), eating (stomach), sex (phallus) and excreting, often in fear (buttocks)” (156).

Through researching actors in Old Comedy I could envision what these actors *may have looked like*, but these images did not have any use to me once I began my acting process.

My approach toward acting is strongly influenced by Constantin Stanislavski's concept of method acting. The approach was introduced my sophomore year of college in a psychological realism class, taught by Danny Scheie. Now I continue to build off the skills I gained; they are fundamental approaches once I take on any

given role, or even sing a song for an audition. To embody a character, I have to identify their “given circumstances”, which is the “who, what, when and where” of the work. This leads me to my character’s “super-objective”, the *thing they want to achieve the most*. When I know what my character wants the most, I have to figure out *how they are going to get it* by mapping their journey through the script into “beats” and “actions”. By knowing what my character wants most I can play actions with objectives I have created, instead of wandering aimlessly through a scene. Objectives ground me with purpose, so I can avoid the trap of “just feeling out a character in the moment”. Doing this work has always been fundamental to shaping my own ideas about any character which I bring to life from text.

Can actors in *The Congressladies* draw parallels to actors in *Ecclesiazusae*?

Aesthetically yes, with the use of masks, cross-dressing and the grotesque physicality of the comic actor. Other than that, I did not entertain the possibility of embodying a role as a Greek actor would have. The acting approach of the first Praxagora, played by an Athenian man, remains relevant to his time. I approached my role drawing from the acting theory and practice I already had.

## The Collaborative Process

*“Though this be madness, yet there is method in ’t.” -William Shakespeare*

As someone who has worked closely with Scheie over the past four years, in productions and classes and as his teaching assistant, I am no stranger to his eccentric directing style. Working with him has shaped me to be flexible, patient, generous and ready for anything. In the beginning of rehearsal no roles had been assigned and there was an incomplete script. During the first read-throughs, Scheie would frequently switch through the twenty-four actors in our ensemble. Praxagora had the majority of lines, so many of the actors took turns reading for her character. While Scheie often chose me to read for her, he also encouraged me to consider playing a male role. At first this encouragement struck me as strange; I saw myself as Praxagora or a Chorus Leader, but I had not entertained the idea of playing a male character such as Blepyros.

The original production of *Ecclesiazusae* included choral songs which are now “absent from the script” (Sommerstein, 24). The first night of rehearsal, every member of the cast was given an assignment: write a song about any issue we felt strongly about to the tune of a well-known song. Under these rather loose guidelines, our ensemble wrote an impressive number of songs, around 140. Including our own songs in the script echoed Aristophanes’ comedies, believed to include “travesties of well-known songs with ridiculous dances and performances mocking popular subjects” (Rossi). Writing and performing parody allowed us to confront issues pertinent to our own lives, and would allow our audience to think about these issues

through the medium of theater. The subjects of our song parodies varied: drone strikes, bisexuality, objectification of women, rape culture, gentrification and so on. Throughout the entire rehearsal process, we worked continually to improve these songs. By opening night we had twenty-one parodies written into the script, many of which were choreographed. Was this modern adaptation of the choral odes an effective method of delivering our ideas? Based on my experience and audience reception, I have come to the conclusion that most of these parodies were overall effective in conveying our messages without being overly antagonistic.

The collaborative process required that we contribute musical parodies *and* that we adapt a scene from the original script. That scene, infamously known as “The Hag Scene”, occurs after Praxagora’s new government has been established. It is notable in our process as being the one scene in which the entire ensemble was involved simultaneously. The newly imposed sexual communalization goes awry, as Epigenes is dragged offstage to sleep with older and uglier women, before he can sleep with the younger girl he desires. Scheie gave us ideas to include in our scene adaptation: a parody of *West Side Story*’s “Tonight” and *Les Misérables* “One Day More”, a choreographed orgy, Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush (the two hags). Our ensemble split up into songwriting and playwriting. I joined the scene writing group, where I could contribute more due to my stronger background in writing than with musical composition.

There were also times during this process I encountered frustration. During the first run-through, I could not remember any of my lines. I had run them on my

own many times, but once I got on stage to deliver them, my brain switched off. This may have happened for a couple reasons. I believe that it had to do with my disconnection from the lines, character and play. The script was continually built throughout this process, with six revisions in all, so our lines were constantly being changed or added. We rehearsed by jumping back and forth through fragments of the show: the script, composing our “hag scene”, practicing songs and learning choreography. By the time we arrived to do a run-through of the show, my lines did not feel solidified at all. After this rehearsal, I made sure to run my lines with another actor, which helped. I was extremely relieved during our first dress rehearsal when the play’s shape finally emerged, and I had my lines and character crystalized.

One of my favorite things about our show was the final scene. In the original play ending, the Chorus-Leader asks the judges to vote for their play, and everyone leaves for a feast offstage. This would have been an unsatisfying end to our show, and it would have let the audience off the hook. To keep them thinking, Scheie created an ending for us. The characters would all be assassinated as they ran to the porta potty, screaming for shelter:

“There’s an old Marx Brothers, where Chico’s playing the piano and he says, ‘I can’t think of the ending’. And Groucho says, ‘Funny, I can’t think of anything else!’ Which is where [the show was at]. It’s a play that needed an ending because Aristophanes’ ending wasn’t any good. A week before we opened we still didn’t have an ending decided.

When communists get control in America or nearby in countries like Cuba, the FBI tried to assassinate them. We tried to assassinate Castro. We went down into Chile and took out Allende. The rich people do not want to share, and they will kill you to keep from sharing” (*Daniel Scheie, The Congressladies’ Adaptation Lecture*).

The assassin was none other than Sarah Palin in drag, played by our musical director Eric Parsons. The mass shooting was meant to be a wake-up call to the audience, perhaps to say “this is what happens when you try to change a system, it is nearly impossible”. It was a brilliant closing to the show, and a direct result of theatrical problem-solving presented by an ancient text.



## **Polishing the Parody**

### ***“I wanted to be Martin Luther Queen.” -Kinsey Sicks’ Ben Schatz***

For three days, the ensemble held workshops in writing and sharpening parody with Ben Schatz, performer and chief lyricist of Kinsey Sicks: “America’s Favorite Dragapella Beautyshop Quartet”. Ben Schatz provided insight and guidance that proved to be invaluable; with 25 actors that had diverse talent and varying degrees of opinion, it was useful to learn from a professional that could provide us with a rubric for improving parodies. In the first workshop, Schatz gave some broad pointers for our cast to consider:

1. Effective parodies go beyond changing the words, they also subvert the original meaning of the song.
2. Always remember that you are responsible for the message you are conveying.
3. Why are you shocking people with this song?
4. You have succeeded when audience members tell you they can never hear the original the same way again.

In regards to choosing subject material on which to write our parodies, Scheie encouraged us to “go over the line” and to view any subject as fair game. I am sure we were given this direction so we felt as much creative freedom as possible, but it

led me to think about comedy's use of shock value. Is there any purpose to being shocking, just for shock's sake? In political satire, shock value is used to provoke audiences and draw attention to what is being criticized. It stirs awake a passive audience. But perhaps shock value also runs the risk of taking away what the artist wants to convey. Working on this show has challenged me to think about the use of shock value, comedy, and its appropriate use in certain situations. I was grateful when Ben Schatz shared his thoughts on navigating the line between humor and offense:

“Many people who write or perform to be funny will claim that “anything goes” in their efforts to be funny, and that they have no limits. Personally, I attempt not to engage in humor that I think is racist, or sexist, etc. There are millions of possibilities for humor, and I like to think I am intelligent and creative enough not to have to rely on worn-out, hurtful stereotypes in order to be funny” (personal communication, April 30· 2015).

To have a master of the satirical craft advise us this way was a good lesson. We were held accountable for what we wrote; writing a parody for the sole purpose of being shocking and offensive would miss the point. Political satire comes from a place of aggression and is meant to be offensive, but its ultimate purpose is to give us pleasure. If satire is unnecessarily cruel, racist, or it mocks those who are powerless, then it is not achieving its purpose. Leonard Freedman expresses that political satire:

“is therapeutic. Every day we are confronted in the newspapers and tv with accounts of the carnage of war, the blundering and arrogance of leaders, the

never-ending examples of greed and corruption. To pay attention to all this as dutiful citizens is extremely depressing. Satirists transmute these continuing tales of human depredation and folly into ridicule so that we may find solace in laughter”(164).

## **Physicality and Voice: Creating Nancy**

*“You have all the characteristics of a popular politician: a horrible voice, bad breeding, and a vulgar manner.” -Aristophanes, Knights, 424 B.C.*

The first day of rehearsal we immediately began physicality work: impersonations of congresswomen. The congresswoman I chose to research and impersonate was Nancy Pelosi. While looking through videos and pictures of her I joked that there was little I could do to exaggerate her features; she looked frightening enough. Even when the hilarious Kirsten Wiig opened an episode of Saturday Night Live as Pelosi, her impersonation paled in comparison to the real thing. To solidify my own impersonation, I wrote down Pelosi’s physical and vocal quirks and practiced in front of a mirror. I worked on physicalizing her intensely bulging eyes and raised eyebrows, her flailing hand movements and closed-tooth, open lipped laugh. This physicality work did not feel forced and unnatural, as I first expected. As a method actor, I find that physicality tends to come *after* thinking about my character’s intentions. However, I found that practicing impersonations first was extremely useful: it served as a base to develop and ground Nancy’s physicality, which proved to be invaluable in upcoming rehearsals. We received official roles the third week of rehearsal: I would be playing Nancy Pelosi, who would be our show’s adaption of Praxagora.

My character work on Praxagora and Nancy Pelosi was essential in the creation of my final character, Nancy. I compiled a character analysis of Praxagora

and the real Nancy Pelosi, which I then tailored to a new character: Nancy Pelosi in *The Congressladies*. There were two different sides to her character I focused on developing. First was her public persona: any time she had to command a crowd she became larger than life, as someone trained from the womb to politicize. She chose the opportune moments to assert her leadership. To contrast this, I wanted the audience to see a private side of her as well. When Nancy was not politicizing, she was with her husband or by herself, and acted as a caring wife. Reading Marc Sandalow's *Madam Speaker: Nancy Pelosi's Life, Times, and Rise to Power* gave me a sense of the actual congresswoman's political and private life, as well as what others had said about her.

Through costume, physicality and voice I succeeded in creating an outrageous caricature, but I had to keep real intentions and objectives to drive Nancy through the play. This role challenged me to create balance between presenting caricature and realistic acting, I wanted to care about her. Actor Peter Sagal illustrates a fine point when comparing a scene in Will Ferrell's performance of George W. Bush in *You're Welcome America* to political cartoonist Ted Rall's illustrations of Bush:

There was that great moment in the middle where all of a sudden it was like [Bush] had this terrible moment of doubt . . . like "What if I mess this up?" And he is haunted by the thought of the soldiers that were killed. And in a weird way, that thing makes the rest of it possible. There is this moment where Will Ferrell actually humanizes it. You know . . . Will Ferrell in a real way kind of likes him. Will Ferrell's George Bush is dumb and does stupid

things, is oblivious, but he is a decent guy which is why you watch him. You contrast that with, say, Ted Rall who pictured Bush as literally a bloodthirsty monster with fangs and blood dripping down his fangs. That is not funny. I mean, that is just literally hateful in that he hates him and it is literally repulsive. I am repulsed by it and I do not wish to look at it any longer” (Dagnes, 183).

Sagal is comparing a performance to a picture, but he demonstrates something I found important performing Nancy. No matter how ridiculous, evil or unlikeable a character may be, there is always something “human” which fuels them.

## **The Performance**

In the dressing room before opening night, many of the performers seemed anxious. We put our hearts into writing and rehearsing, but what if the audience didn't like it? All our apprehension dissipated once the show began; there was uproarious laughter and gasps of shock, the audience absolutely loved it! Our opening night was the moment everything truly came together; I experienced the joy and gratification of all our hard work.

An older gentleman's remark during a post-show discussions made me question what kind of responses we would elicit in a conservative community:

“You might think that the art you're creating is shocking, but you're preaching to the choir. The people here share your viewpoints. You should perform it where I'm from, in Idaho, where people would not be so receptive.”

He presented a valid point. If we had an unlimited budget and time frame, I would like to perform *The Congressladies* outside of UCSC to encourage discussion from audiences who would feel much more uncomfortable with our work; their comments would be valuable to growing political artists. What if we performed in the most conservative areas of the United States?

I talked to audience members who found problematic aspects with the show, but most people couldn't stop telling me how much they loved it. Either way, our goal was never to cater to the Santa Cruz community. We achieved our goal; we had

created a political burlesque through which we could express many of the sociopolitical issues that mattered to *us*.



## **Final Thoughts**

Closing night of our show, there were many things running through my mind. I thought about my very first audition at UCSC, and how horribly it went (I'd travel back in time to stop myself from using Sophie's monologue from *Star Spangled Girl* in a heartbeat). I thought about my growth as an actor over the past four years; I had acted in everything from *Chautauqua*, to *Shakes2Go*, to *RENT*. I have cherished all these memories, but playing Nancy Pelosi on UCSC's main stage was the most demanding and rewarding theatrical piece I have had the pleasure of doing.

One of the questions I continually asked myself through this process was, why is the actor important in political satire? I am continually drawn to theater because it allows a safe space for people express to their stories, and my role as an actor remains as long as there is the need for telling these stories. "The laughter", Alison Dagnes writes, "that brings the nation joy in troubled times is, after all, the satirist's highest purpose" (219). The actor's role in political satire will remain critical as long as we continue to seek comic relief from flaws present in our social structure.

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