

## Mercurio Actor Notes, Colorado Shakespeare Festival, 2019

### PRE-REHEARSAL

Though I've worked with CSF for the past 3 summers and have a strong working relationship with them, I never dreamed I would be cast as Mercutio, a role almost always played by a man, and often a young one. I was hungry for the role, I prepared well for the audition, and I got the part. And NOW WHAT? I exchanged emails with the director Chris Duval, asking "why me?" as a way to begin to align with the role. Chris responded with these ideas (in red):

*I am interested in your Mercutio being a woman who is choosing to live life as a man, with her true gender only known to a very few. The characters of Benvolio, Sampson, and Abraham are also women. Instead of making gender-diverse casting a practice in this production because of solely a commitment I have towards increasing equality in our work, it also resonates deeply for me as the motor of this play. What happens when this play has women who are forced into relationships with men because they are second-class citizens, and then what happens when there are women who choose to live lives as men because that is the only way they can feel safe, serve in the military (perhaps Mercutio was in the military....), or follow through with their own sexual orientation, etc.*

*I wonder if there is something in Mercutio's past - militaristically and / or personally - that haunts her? She is somewhat older than the gang she runs with, and has perhaps lost love, lost her true self as a woman because she cannot be independent to her own truth in this world as a woman - that is part of her darkness? Her hidden life is her true life and she has lost something very pure in her life. I also wonder about something of PTSD in her life. A history of military activity - and her age - has resulted in her being the only one in the play that is old enough to have seen true war and what violence can truly do to individuals and to a society.*

As an actor I work confidently but also messily, associatively, stumbling in the dark at first to find details and specifics that I can hold on to, that feed me, and that lead to other generative bits of information. Some things I began to work with:

--The words themselves. Why are there so many, why does Mercutio have the freedom, compulsion, desire to talk as much as he does?

--Back story, woman as man, the gender of role. Why does this woman of wealth (the wealthiest, most powerful family in Verona, cousin to Prince and to Paris) choose to live her life as a man? Hyper intelligent, a tomboy, learned to fight from older brothers, good at it, likes weapons, make her feel safe and powerful, roams the streets as a boy with a sister, defend her honor, see how her sister treated. She was set to marry an older man, like a Paris, but either ran away with family friend to military before then or perhaps did marry at 14 or 16, hated it, unloved, pregnant, a baby, perhaps, and just abandoned it all.

### REHEARSAL

--Text—vocal work comes easily to me, but Jeff Parker a godsend for text work—what words he didn't understand, that audience needs to hear for comprehension. Consonants versus vowels. I am pretty attentive to articulating consonants and using vowels, but Jeff drove home how careful we have to be to help the audience understand the sense. Mercutio is so limitless,

unbounded, loose, relaxed, free, chaotic even it was a challenge to find the balance between playing him

--Language SHARP and INTENTIONAL, then when that doesn't work VIOLENCE sharp and intentional.

--Ambiguity OK! During fight—do I want to kill him or just injure him?

--So nice to work on so many words and prove that I can play a role this big. Gives me confidence to know I can play something bigger.

--TRUST THE WORDS—balance between words and physicality. Often enough to just let the words SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES. When speaking words, sound and feeling in mouth tells the story. Don't have to embellish with physicality.

### PERFORMANCE

--As shows progressed, my breathing relaxed, it dropped down, I relaxed. What does it mean to relax?

--Performance goals: fight; specificity and speed; joy, freedom, imagination, hyperbole

--What is goal of performance run? To PLAY. I know lines, so keep experimenting, keep deepening, add specificity.

--Mercurio = Fire. How this manifests: explosive, hot, fast, changeable, bright, sparky, bouncy.

--I must remain loose and relaxed for this role. Mercurio is not symmetrical, but asymmetrical, constant motion, circles, diagonals.

### LESSONS LEARNED

--a good director makes all the difference. Power of Chris: trusts his actors, relaxed, welcoming, supportive, says YES to actor choices constantly, OK to say NO to actor choices after deliberation, uses humor to disarm and comfort, intuitive, knows what he wants but allows actors to find it organically, through repetition and conversation.

--freedom in playing masculine woman. My God. Who knew femininity could be so constricting? Who knew I could feel this liberated even though I love being a girl?

--What are the elements I'm working with to play Mercurio?

\*clear speech: consonants and vowels

\*Mercurio limitless energy (easy for me)

\*Joy of Mercurio (easy for me)

\*Specificity: movement and text and choices—choices can change but should remain specific.

\*Work Mask

\*Mercurial—changes on a dime.

\*Hyperbolic—big and specific and confident in ALL directions

--How not to degrade? In one way, at my best when we open since the lead up has been so intense and I have 4 weeks of rehearsal to support my choices. But also, the performance should continue to get stronger, as I repeat and continue to grow in confidence (having proven to myself that I can do it).

### What of this process do I take into teaching acting and directing?

--Chris a model of good directing.

--Kindness, patience, generosity, empathy.

--Acting often a balancing act of two dissonant things: bigness of Mercutio expression and clarity.

--Making a role your own: making sure to express essential characteristics of character, but not get quieted by other people's perspectives of the role.

## RESEARCH

*The Tradition of Female Transvestism in Early Modern Europe,*

by Rudolf M. Dekker, Lotte C. van de Pol

Some specific ideas I enjoyed:

--most women 16-25 years old.

--how did these historical women look as men? Was I not perceived to be a beautiful woman, but get a lot of attention as men? Handsome, youthful.

--was my true identity ever revealed?

--what's my motive? Main motive is freedom, getting away from oppressiveness. I don't think pre-destined, not especially religious, but from a young age inclined to recklessness, aggression, fighting, stubbornness.

--possibly romantic? Perhaps in love with older man, or willing to become sexually/romantically involved with older man to get into military.

## Research from DU History professor Ingrid Tague on female soldiers

Two quick examples: Catalina de Erauso, a Spanish nun who worked as a soldier in the early 17c (her memoir is available in English translation as *\*Lieutenant Nun\**) and Hannah Snell (hers is *\*The Female Soldier; or, the Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell\**, published 1750). For the later 18c, there's a fantastic story of the Chevalier d'Eon, a French person who lived as both a man and a woman, worked as a spy and a diplomat, and was eventually court-ordered to live as a woman. But after death, they found out she was anatomically male. There's a great book about the whole story called *\*Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman\**.

A good secondary source is Diane Dugaw, *\*Warrior Women and Popular Balladry 1650-1850\**. Dugaw also wrote the intro to the modern edition of Snell's memoir. There's also Julie Wheelwright, *\*Amazons and Military Maids\**.

There's quite a bit of debate about how accurate even the memoirs are, and the extent to which they may have been embellished and/or actually written by men. But for your purposes, if you want to get into a sense of how early modern people might have thought about what was possible, the memoirs and ballads would be a good place to start. Early modern conceptions of sexual identity generally were just a lot more fluid than they are today. Basically, women were seen as imperfect versions of men, so their sexual organs, e.g., were seen as the same as men's, only interior rather than exterior (because they didn't have the heat to push them out). So there was an idea that a woman who engaged in a lot of physical exertion might actually transform into a man by sort of popping out her sex organs. Depending on how you want to play it, it might also be worth considering that women were seen as much more sexually voracious than men (basically on the Aristotelian view that the imperfect desires the perfect, so women desired men). All of this meant that sexual identity wasn't seen as fixed in the way it is today, and was much more tied to external appearance than to an idea of immutable physical characteristics.

New Yorker, March 25, 2019 – Peter Sack

The artist takes years to layer images and materials on top of each other and he calls it sedimentary. And someone says they're global in the best sense of the word. "Their sweep from history to literature to world events is astounding." He feels the presence of the materials he's buried. And I thought about Mercutio, any complicated role: in and of themselves they are a world. That character has years, topography, landscape, neuroscience. So for example, I spent a lot of time thinking about Mercutio, and to some extent that's important. But where is that in the makeup versus the current experience. I'm interested in the relationship of circumstances happening right now versus ones in the past.

More from this. He taught literature, and then he was a poet, first painting at 49. "This has been burned. I think of this as works of uncovering. I'm trying to do justice to my feeling of what the mind is like. It's sedimentary. He too had buried his experiences, they fused and compounded . . . only late in life had they transformed into art." Someone wants to be something; it takes years to uncover that truth about yourself. Interesting that we are born knowing all the things we are.

Adding to list of verbs of what acting is: acting is doing, acting is uncovering—character is 3D over time and space and you're uncovering details.

"As Sacks adds each new layer, he feels the presence of the materials he has buried, as though history itself is pressing upward. Sometimes he sets fire to the topmost layer, singeing its surface and revealing what's below. Seven or eight layers . . . Their striated depth, like that of an archeological site, suggests the accretions of civilizations."

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Fighting Styles, Mercutio v. Tybalt, from Chris Duval

Tybalt's style is roughly taken from Spanish and Italian fighting systems that had developed during the time, that were very mathematical and precise. Saviolo and Di Grassi were Italian Masters of Fence that are styles of which Tybalt would have been familiar.

Mercutio is a nod to the old English fighting styles that relied less on math and more on robustness. George Silver was an English Master of Fence that holds quite a lot of reference for how Mercutio fights.

<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/index.asp>

[https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/ptsd\\_basics.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/ptsd_basics.asp)

<https://www.military.com/special-operations/training-to-be-a-navy-seal.html>

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