

# Andrea Fraser Targets Male Take on Feminist Movement, circa 1972

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"Men on the Line," Andrea Fraser's one-woman, one-night only show at the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy in Los Angeles, Jan. 23, dripped with dramatic irony. Fraser, a performance artist known for her work on institutional critique and the roles and portrayals of women, derived her script from a radio talk show broadcast from 1972, in which three men and a male moderator earnestly discuss the burgeoning feminist movement of the time. "Men on the Line" was presented in connection with the Pacific Standard Time Performance and Public Art Festival, sponsored by the Getty Museum and LA×ART.

Fraser impersonated all four men at the same time, although much of the humor and content of the performance derived not so much from the gender transgression as from the leap across time from the fervor of the cultural revolutions of the late 1960s and early '70s to the present. The dramatic irony of the piece—that the art audience of today has perspective on early feminism—went over well, as Fraser herself played it straight, letting her text do the work of inciting analysis in the minds of her listeners.

The piece started with a bit of music, followed by a short audio clip from a conversation between artist Judy Chicago and menstrual activist Isabella Welch. In a nice meta-theatrical nod to the idea of the performative self, the women referred to the idea of "today's" woman (in 1972) as "an actress," "redefining our sense of self." "The reference group is ourselves . . . our position as outsiders."

The ensuing debate among the men, which constituted the show, concerned how the men imagined their own role in this gender theater. All of the men seemed sincerely to seek an appropriate role to play that would accommodate their changing view of themselves in light of their feminist sympathies. As the moderator put it, paraphrasing early 20th century American socialist and union organizer Eugene Debs, "So long as there is a woman in chains, I am not free."

Portraying the men, Fraser was unmistakably a woman, albeit dressed somewhat androgynously in a white collared shirt, grey sweater and flared green khaki trousers. Her feminine voice dipped into a lower vocal range to imitate the speakers' lockjaw cadences. To some extent, she assumed the postures of the men as they spoke through her. Though Fraser was successful in collectively invoking the absent men, the specific identities of the participants in the conversation were muddy. One-person shows portraying a variety of characters generally depend upon the ability of the performer to differentiate individual personages for the audience. That Fraser remained seated throughout the performance limited her ability to achieve this clarity. Most likely, she believed that the men were seated during the radio talk and remained true to that idea, despite the consequences for her effort to turn an audio recording into a live, in-person performance.

The men lapsed repeatedly into inadvertent humor, especially as seen from the perspective of today's audience, as they discussed their relationships with women and the women's movement. One of the participants fumbled through the history of his previous marriages before commenting that he had found "glorious equality" with his third wife. Another admitted, "I have the feeling that women are talking about me behind my back." Later one of them remarked that he was happy not to be locked into the financial responsibility of being the breadwinner and celebrated his changing role: "I can cook now."

While their success in overcoming their blindness was doubtful, their dedication to the cause was true and touching. "I have trouble now relating



to women who are not feminists," said one, who believed himself "largely cured of my sexism." The men spoke about the "loneliness" of their transformed selves: having given up their traditional gender definition, they were launched into a no-man's land of confusion, subject to accusations that they were "effete intellectual snobs" and "probably queer." The liberation of men by the women's movement also brought about the possibility of the men opening up to other men: "I can put my arms around a man and say 'I like you.' I couldn't do that before."

Perhaps the strangest twist in the show was a recording, played toward the end, called "Woman Which Includes Man," a role reversal fantasy, apparently created by one of the participants, which put women on top, occupying all the positions in government and other forms of power, leaving the men second-class citizens whose "exposed genitals flop around foolishly" and who suffer from "clitoris envy." In this fantasy, men dream of getting married and long "to be engulfed by the woman" sexually, the vagina surrounding the poor penis, that needs to give up "the testical orgasm" to achieve fulfillment. The men were asked to comment on how that made them feel. As one of the impersonated men, Fraser broke into tears. John Lennon's "Working Class Hero" played as Fraser wept and, eventually, abruptly left the stage.

The performance is part of a series curated by Emi Fontana, who is commissioning contemporary artists to create work about the Women's Building, a center for feminist activism founded in LA in 1973. The series continues on Sunday with a performance by Vaginal Davis at Bullocks Wilshire in LA.

Andrea Fraser, *Men on the Line*, KPFK, 1972. Courtesy of West of Rome Public Art, Pasadena

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