

*The Trial of Countess Elizabeth Báthory:*

Developing a Defense for Dame Dracula and Deconstructing Dominant Damsels

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Submitted under the supervision of Michal Kobialka to the University Honors Program at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts, *summa cum laude*, in Acting.

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*Thank you to Christine Blasey Ford, Anita Hill, and countless other women who have been  
silenced.*

*And thank you, Erzsébet. For everything.*

## Abstract

For my thesis, I wrote and performed a one-woman show about Countess Erzsébet Báthory, with the intention of reframing the infamous lady's narrative from her perspective, and paralleling her plight to contemporary issues of misogyny and oppression. I wrote the script after months of academic and laic research, recorded and mixed a sonically complicated section of the piece called "The Voices," constructed a historically accurate costume, perfected a variation on a Hungarian dialect, memorized my complicated script, and performed it in front of my classmates, mentors, and friends. During the piece, I presented the legendary figure to the audience using the theatrical device of the "Joker," taken from Augusto Boal and Forum Theatre, and announced they would vote at the end of the piece on whether she was innocent or guilty. I then transformed into the Countess and delivered a monologue defending her actions, her legend, and her legacy. The audience voted, and afterwards, I linked the story of Báthory to modern examples of women who have been destroyed by the patriarchal structures in our society. In both shows, the audience voted Báthory innocent, which is antithetical to the current consensus. However, I found that the arguments and discussions I incited through my piece were more interesting and more important than the outcome of the vote. As I continued throughout my process, I realized that it was my job to pose the question to the audience, not to answer it for them. My job was to open minds and untie the knots that society had tied in my audience's brain. Through the creation and performing of this piece, I was able to combine my multiple theatrical talents of dramaturgy, playwrighting, and acting and promote insightful and educated discussions about feminism and misogyny in my community, both of which were goals I had set out to achieve in completing this project.

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# The Trial of Countess Elizabeth Báthory

A Free Play Project by Rachel Lawhead

(Trigger warnings: description of graphic violence, sexual violence, adult language and content)

## Character List:

- The Joker *lifted from the practices of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre. A introduction, a guide. A mediator between the past and the present.*
- Elizabeth *Countess Erzsébet Báthory de Ecsed. Or is she? A compilation of the Bloody Countess' refracted narrative.*

*(all characters will be portrayed by one actor.)*

*(Also needed is a pre-recorded compilation called "The Voices.")*

- Biography *reading Báthory's personal history, with a distinctive bias. Can be male or female, but should sound pretentious and a bit omniscient.*
- Legal *reading a list of theoretical charges against Báthory. Should also be male, and very dry and dull, no matter how ridiculous the charges.*
- Sadist *reading a description of the various methods of torture that Báthory used on her victims. Should be male, should almost sound excited, maybe even aroused, by the sadistic practices.*
- Sexist *reading disparaging comments about the Countess, her vanity, and her womanhood. Should be male, should sound self-assured, maybe even slimy.*
- Amateur *reading descriptions of the Countess' association with bisexuality, vampirism, lycanthropy, etc. Sometimes right. Should be male, should sound very excitable.*
- György *reading a description of Csejthe Castle on Decmeber 29<sup>th</sup>, 1610, as György Thurzó supposedly found it. Should be male, read as if speaking to a crowd of terrified and easily influenced people. Should have similar dialect to Elizabeth.*

*(An intimate theatre space. The lights should have house lights up, with a general bright wash over the stage. No set, no props, no theatre magic. We are here to hear a story.)*

*(After all of the audience has entered the space, there may be an introduction before the piece begins (in the case of the original performance, there was an introduction of the title of the piece.))*

*(The Joker enters. She is dressed in the base layer of Elizabeth's costume (in the case of the original performance: a yellow chemise, a black skirt, black leggings, black heeled boots, and a maroon corset.), with general, basic stage makeup, that will also double as Elizabeth's makeup. The costume and wig for Elizabeth are offstage, preset for the transformation to come (in the case of the original performance: a hoopskirt with black overskirt sewn to the bottom, an overskirt, a pre-laced and loosely tied bodice, a black headpiece, a dark brown wig, and gold hair clip.))*

*(See Notes at end of script for additional reference pictures)*

*(The Joker should be charismatic, compelling, and trustworthy. She should walk the line between performative and robotic. She should never seem like she has a bias. She is an objective figure.)*

Joker: Welcome to "The Trial of Countess Elizabeth Báthory."

Raise your hand high if you have heard of Elizabeth Báthory.

What have you heard?

*(The Joker calls on three to five people, who tells her what they have heard about Elizabeth.)*

So Countess Erzsébet Báthory de Ecsed, which is anglicized to Elizabeth Báthory, was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian noblewoman who was arrested in 1610 for supposedly torturing and murdering anywhere from 80 to 650 young women, many of whom were her own servants.

Some claim that she bathed in the blood of these virgin girls to keep herself looking young and beautiful.

According to the Guinness Book of World Records, she is the most prolific female serial killer of all time.

However.

She never stood trial for her crimes.

Because of a deal her relatives made with the King, she was placed under house arrest.

She died alone in her castle.

She never got her day in court.

She never got a chance to defend herself.

*(beat.)*

She is getting that chance today.

Elizabeth Báthory will defend herself in front of you.

You, the audience will be her jury.

Your collective decision, decided by a majority vote, will determine Báthory's fate.

Is she innocent, or is she guilty?

That is your decision.

Listen well. Pay attention. Enjoy.

*(Blackout)*

*(During this blackout, the Joker leaves stage and quick changes into Elizabeth's wig and costume. During this time, The Voices recording begins. It is comprised of a variety of readings, that will overlap in creative ways and tell Elizabeth's story from very particular points of view.)*

*(See Notes at end of script for a link to the Voices recording used in the original performance.)*

Biography: Countess Erzsébet Báthory de Ecsed was born in 1560 at Nyírbator, a child of inbreeding, into one of the most powerful, aristocratic families in Hungary. She suffered seizures and fits of rage as a child, foreshadowing her violent and sadistic tendencies later in life.

At age 10, she was engaged to the 16 year old Count Ferenc Nádasdy de Násdad et Fogarasföld. They married in 1575.

In 1578, Ferenc became the chief commander of the Hungarian troops, leaving Erzsébet to run the household and the estate, as well as protect her husband's estates on route to Vienna, which were being threatened by the Ottomans.

By 1601, the rumors had started. Young servant girls were dying. Parents were told they had died of illness, but the locals claimed they were being tortured to death. A Croatian woman named Anna Darvolya was already living in the Nádasdy household, and was running a torture and execution mill with the knowledge of the Count and Countess.

In 1604, Ferenc died from a mysterious illness. He entrusted the responsibility of looking after his heirs and widow to György Thurzó. This man would later become the Palatine of Hungary, and would later lead the investigation into her sordid crimes.

After her husband's death, Erzsébet could no longer rely on his protection, from their many enemies, as well as from the consequences for her deeds. She raised armies to defend her property from the Turks, quelled a peasant uprising in 1605, made frequent trips to the King's Court and demanded that the money her husband was owed be repaid. But stories of her crimes were catching up to her,

and by 1610, rumors of Erzsébet's horrific deeds had reached Vienna, and the newly crowned King Mátyás II ordered Thurzó to investigate Erzsébet. Thurzó and his two notaries collected testimony of her guilt from over 300 witnesses, including some of Báthory's own staff.

In December of 1610, Thurzó and his men arrested Erzsébet at Csejthe Castle, along with her accomplices. Although King Mátyás wanted her dead, Thurzó was persuaded by Báthory's family to aid in sparing her, and Thurzó convinced King Mátyás that a speedy trial and execution would negatively affect the nobility, and Erzsébet was placed under permanent house arrest and solitary confinement. Her name was never to be spoken in polite society again.

She died in August of 1614, was buried in the church of Csejthe Castle in November, until her remains were moved to the Báthory family estate in 1617. The location of her body is still currently unknown.

Legal:

Countess Elizabeth Báthory.

You have been charged with

multiple counts of adultery;

multiple counts of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon;

multiple counts of bisexuality;

multiple counts of child abuse;

multiple counts of harassment;

multiple counts of kidnapping;

multiple counts of lycanthropy;

multiple counts of murder in the first degree;

multiple counts of murder in the second degree;

multiple counts of perjury;

multiple counts of sexual assault;

multiple counts of vanity;

and multiple counts of vampirism.

Sadist: The main thing that people know about her is that she bathed in the blood of virgin girls. But she did so much more than just that.

Her accomplices used their power as heads of household to find victims for Báthory before she tortured and murdered them. Most of them were around 10 to 14 years old. The younger the better. The little girls were easy targets.

She would use a variety of instruments to torture and murder her victims: a whip, a cudgel, a fire iron, a needle, a pair of cutting sheers. She would bite out pieces of flesh from the girls, sinking her teeth into their soft, virginal skin. She attacked them with knives, slashing and cutting until she was splashed with the blood.

When she was sick in bed and couldn't move, she would bring her victims over to her and bite their faces and shoulders instead of beating them. She stuck needles under their fingernails, and if anyone tried removing the needles, she would cut off their fingers. She locked her victims in the dungeon, and beat them until the bodies swelled up from the punishment. She would cut their swollen bodies with razors and hungrily watch the blood drip down their skin. She stripped one of the victims naked, smeared her with honey, and drove her out into the cold, not allowing her back into the castle.

Her thirst for blood and murder were unquenchable.

Sexist: I mean, the Guinness Book of World Records calls her the most prolific female serial killer of all time. She murdered hundreds of young girls to bathe in their blood to keep her looking young and beautiful. Not that she actually did look young and beautiful, from all accounts, she died looking like an old hag. Talk about irony—she tried her best to stay beautiful and she ended up dying alone looking like an old, stupid woman. She was, like, over 50 when she finally died. She'd been under house arrest for three years by then – imagine how awful she must have looked. She clearly hated herself, and lashed out against younger women because she was envious of their youth and beauty.

What a horrible bitch.

Amateur: Elizabeth was a child of incest, and that's why she was so fucked up. I mean though, her whole family was fucked up. Her aunt Klara was a lesbian who also like torture her female servants for enjoyment. And, I mean like, her husband was fucked up, too. But he was out at war, playing football with the head of the men he'd just killed. And Elizabeth was back at home, or over at bisexual Aunt Klara's estate, having lots of sex with all of these women and men.

Of course, her main lover was Anna Darvolya, and she was also the one who really taught her how to torture.

Darvolya was smart, and she made sure that all the victims were poor and no one would miss them.

But after Darvolya went blind and died, the Countess took over, and she started to murder upper class girls, and that's where the problems really started. She got sloppier and sloppier, and the pastor at the Church stopped performing Christian

burials, which meant that Elizabeth didn't have anywhere to put the bodies, so she fucking dumped them off of the castle. She was in the middle of this when Thurzó caught her and arrested her! She eventually died in her little bricked up room, and after she died, one of the guards still went to look at her, 'cuz she was said to be the most beautiful woman in the world. I bet she was.

György: On the night of December 29<sup>th</sup>, in the year of our Lord sixteen-hundred and ten, the snow was falling as we approached Csejthe Castle, the home of Erzsébet Báthory, and the location of her horrific deeds. My men and I leapt off our horses, and crept up the thin pathway to the entrance. We didn't bother with knocking, and found the door unbarred to our advances. As we opened the wooden door into her front entrance hallway, a sight so awful met our eyes. A young servant girl, no more than fourteen years of age, lay dead before us, her virgin blood staining the stone around her. The air stank of death and unhuman acts. It did not take us long to find the murderess. As we entered the dining room chamber, we found Erzsébet and her accomplices: torturing another servant! Our shouts of anguish seemed to not phase the demon woman, and it was not until my men apprehended her that she seemed to snap back to reality. We rescued the girl, and continued on to find more and more wounded servants, as well as dozens locked up in the dungeon. This woman, this witch, this Countess Báthory has been caught red-handed in her crimes, and she has now been apprehended. She will face justice!

*(The Voices recording ends, trailing off until a loud blast of music, along with a sudden rise in the lights reveals Elizabeth, ready for the defense of her life.)*

*(Elizabeth is framed by a single special, keeping her in one isolating and illuminating pool of light. She is dressed in a richly embroidered dress of the period. Her long dark hair is up and tied back, ideally topped with a period appropriate headdress. The rest of the stage is dark or lit by a dark red glow.)*

*(See Notes at end of script for performance photos from the original production).*

*(Elizabeth looks out at the audience, trying to peer through the bright lights and the darkness to see another human face. She takes a deep, rattling breath, as if she has not breathed in four hundred years. She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. She tries once more, and her voice comes out raspy at first, but as she continues to speak, it becomes less forced and more natural. She speaks with a touch of a Hungarian accent.)*

Elizabeth: Hello?

Can you hear me?

Can you understand me?

Strange.

*(beat.)*

I have not spoken in a long time.

Four hundred years is a long time to be silent.

*(beat.)*

My name is Erzsébet.

Or was...

Am I still Erzsébet Báthory?

Do you lose your identity after you die?

Or are you still you?

A twisted version of me has lived on in the legends.

That name inspires fear and terror and hatred.

Is that me different from this me?

The legends are so far from truth.

*(beat.)*

You are here for my story?

You are here to judge me?

You will decide my fate?

Very well.

*(beat.)*

My name is Erzsébet Báthory, and I am innocent.

I did not do these things.

I did not murder or torture these women.

The evidence is false and manipulated.

The legends you have heard about me are wrong.

My character has been slandered.

My actions obfuscated.

My reputation exaggerated to the point of ridiculousness.

I am not what the legends say I am.

I am innocent.

There is no physical evidence for my crimes.

There was no physical evidence for my crimes.

No corpses, no body parts, no murder weapons were found.

Only witnesses who told stories.

The number of victims never aligned.

Every witness claimed a different number.

Someone claimed I killed 80 people.

Someone else claimed I killed 650 people.

Some men hundreds of years later took a sum of the claims to get their number.

These are not small discrepancies—these are wide gaps in accuracy!

None of the witnesses saw me committing any crimes.

They heard rumors.

And were tortured in to confessing them as truth.

By the powerful men trying to erase me from history.

The King of Hungary, King Mátyás, hated me.

He owed my dead husband money, but refused to repay me.

He resented the aid I gave to my cousin who was plotting a rebellion against him.

He sent no army to protect my lands when they were attacked.

He wanted my land for himself.

He wanted me gone.

But I refused to give in.

I raised my own army and protected my lands.

I never stopped petitioning to be repaid.

I found allies on my own.

I was a strong, powerful woman in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

I was a threat.

But the rumors were circulating, and King Mátyás believed them.  
He wanted to get rid of me, so rumors and lies were enough to slander my name.  
I was wiped from Hungarian history.  
My true story was forgotten, and only my legend lives on.  
Have you heard the legends of Countess Elizabeth Báthory?  
They say I murdered my servants.  
They say I was caught red-handed.  
They say I bathed in blood.  
They say I was a vampire, or a werewolf, or a bisexual dominatrix.  
Unfounded lies.  
My narrative is no longer one simple story.  
It has been refracted.  
I am one iteration.  
Telling you that I am innocent.  
Did I bathe in blood?  
Was I a vampire?  
Was I an envious crone?  
Did I hate women?  
No.  
I never bathed in anyone's blood.  
There are no records from my time that mention it.  
The first time it appeared was over one hundred years after my death.  
In a paper written by a Catholic monk named Brother Lazlo.

Lazlo invented the blood-bathing story.

He invented that I thought it kept me looking young and beautiful.

He invented that I was a vampire.

This aided his Hapsburgs masters in keeping Europe Catholic.

If Protestants were vampires, then they were undesirable and untrustworthy.

He revived my story, soiled my reputation, and shamed the Hungarian people with my infamy.

Lazlo was not a reliable source.

But this lie has persisted.

So many lies have persisted!

Was I a werewolf?

No.

That came from another man writing about me in his travelogue.

It was quoted by another man writing about werewolves.

Was I an adulterer?

A lesbian?

Did I have illegitimate children that I murdered?

No.

Those came from more men writing about me three-hundred years after I died.

They used folklore and peasant stories as their sources.

Objectivity and accuracy do not exist in any of the stories about me.

I have been turned into a villain.

All the men writing about me built on each other's work.

They accepted the lies as gospel.

But why?

Why am I always guilty?

*(beat.)*

Because they want me to be a villain.

I was a real person.

But it tells a better story if I am a villain.

If I am made fiction.

If I am the Bloody Countess.

If I am Countess Dracula.

Ah, Transylvania...

What a boon for their tourism industry.

Even my homeland does not insist on my innocence.

They capitalize on my guilt and perpetuate the lies.

The lies that have hid the woman I was.

I am not what they have made me.

I was a strong partner to my husband.

I was a widow who demanded equal treatment.

I was a good mother to my children.

I was a protector of women, despite the lies.

I was responsible for delivering justice within my estate.

An old woman's home was vandalized, her property stolen.

And her daughter raped.

This woman begged for my help, and I did.

I urged the Deputy to punish those men who had violated those women.

I wanted to protect those women.

I wanted to ruin the men who destroyed them like they were nothing.

The same way I would be destroyed like I was nothing.

I felt a kinship with women, and the struggles we face.

I cared about their well-being, their safety, their happiness.

Why would I violate young women?

Why would I torture and murder them?

Why would I do the same thing I wanted to ruin those men for?

But people want spectacle.

A horrifying tale to sink their teeth into.

Many have claimed I acted strange.

But they warp the truth.

I suffered from many mental disorders.

Untreated epilepsy.

I was not evil, I was sick and suffering.

I will not claim I was perfect.

I was raised in the aristocracy.

I was privileged.

I had responsibility and power.

I had to control my household.

I had to exercise discipline to ensure order and prevent chaos.

The chaos that once plagued Hungary.  
There was a disastrous peasant revolt.  
They raided villages, murdered priests.  
They wreaked havoc on the countryside.  
The nobility stopped the bloodshed.  
The peasantry were forever made serfs – as a future warning.  
But there were still many peasant revolts within my lifetime.  
I raised armies to protect my land, my family.  
I had to keep order in my household.  
If my servants disobeyed me, they needed to be punished.  
To be taught that my household would not fall to rebellious commoners.  
I would not be disrespected, simply because I was a widow.  
I tried to ensure the safety of myself, my children, and my family.  
I tried to run the household as best I could.  
I tried to protect our reputation.  
I never sadistically participated in the act of torture or murder.  
The legends are lies.  
I am innocent.  
I am not the villain these men tried to create.  
There was no physical evidence, only inconsistent testimony.  
All we have are stories.  
Stories which are lies.  
Lies written by men.

Men that never knew who I was.

There is a line from one of my surviving letters.

“know you this, that I will not allow myself to be dominated by men for long.”

I will not allow myself to be dominated by men for long.

A translation of one of my most famous lines.

My legend has been shaped by men.

My reputation has been slandered by men.

My story has been warped and whittled by men.

I will not allow myself to be dominated by men for long.

This line is a promise, a vow, a prophecy.

Keep my promise.

Hold my vow.

Make this prophecy come true.

Break my refracted narrative.

Everyone who told my story was biased.

Everyone has motive.

No one tells the truth.

There is no truth.

My true story is locked in Castle Csjethe, and will never be known.

Even I am not real.

I am a construction.

I am a patchwork of research, trying to be as accurate as possible.

But with me?

With the past?

Accuracy doesn't exist.

The true story of Erzsébet Báthory doesn't exist.

It is yours to create.

Decide my fate.

Shape what you believe.

Create my story.

I was a strong and powerful woman.

Underestimated and overpowered by the men around me.

The legends were born from lies.

I was innocent.

I am innocent.

I did not murder or torture those women.

My name is Erzsébet Báthory.

And I am innocent.

Raise your hand if you think I am innocent.

This is my truth.

This is my story.

*(Elizabeth stares out at the audience, trying to make disturbingly intense eye contact with one audience member for about five seconds. Then, suddenly, Elizabeth removes her headpiece and wig, suddenly transforming into the Joker,. The lights return to the way they were at the beginning of the show: with house lights up and a general wash over the stage. The Joker*

*gradually removes all of the costume pieces while talking to the audience, returning to the way she looked at the beginning of the show.)*

Joker:           So.

                  Raise your hand high if you think she was guilty.

*(The Joker looks out at the audience, and counts the votes for guilty. She has full permission to adlib and encourage the audience to vote, using phrases such as: “There is no middle ground” “You have to vote.”)*

                  Raise your hand high if you think she was innocent.

*(The Joker counts the votes for innocent, doing the same kinds of adlibbing that she did for guilty. Once all the votes have been counted, she looks at the audience.)*

                  So, the majority of you voted her *(guilty or innocent, depending on the outcome)*.

                  Why?

                  Why did you think that?

*(The Joker adlibs until she gets some brave soul to raise their hand, and answer the question.)*

*(This continues until the Joker hears from a few audience member who voted in that majority, about why they voted that way. Once about five audience members in the majority have spoken, the Joker takes in the audience as a whole again.)*

Joker:           What about you who thought she was *(guilty or innocent, depending on the outcome)*?

                  Why?

*(Once the Joker has spoken to a few more audience members who voted in the minority, asking similar stock questions, the Joker looks at the audience.)*

Joker:           So you voted her *(guilty or innocent, depending on the outcome.)*

So, she is (*guilty or innocent, depending on the outcome.*).

I promised you your decision would matter.

*(beat.)*

But it didn't.

Báthory is dead.

And we can't bring her back.

If she was guilty, she escaped punishment.

She lived under house arrest, then died in her sleep.

If she really was guilty, she didn't suffer consequences equal to her crimes.

If she was innocent, she couldn't prove it.

Her name, her legacy, her family were destroyed.

If she really was innocent, then her infamy is built on a perpetuated lie.

Any truly exculpatory evidence is gone.

There is no way to truly know.

*(beat.)*

Then what was the purpose of this?

Why did I tell you this story?

Countess Erzsébet Báthory was a woman in power.

And she was destroyed by powerful men who feared, hated, and mistrusted her.

This same fear destroyed Bloody Mary.

It destroyed Lizzie Borden.

It destroyed Anita Hill.

It destroyed Hillary Clinton.

It destroyed Christine Blasey-Ford.

This fear, hatred, and mistrust allows us to justify destroying powerful women.

Because they pose a threat to the systems that have kept them subjugated.

We have a fascination with women who chose to subvert from the norm.

And we like to watch them suffer.

Why?

Why do we fear women in power?

Why do we mistrust strong women?

*(beat,)*

I wish I had answers. I'm here to ask questions.

So should you.

Stop and think.

Undo the knots someone else tied in your brain.

And instead of destroying empowered women, destroy the systems that  
empowered their destruction.

*(Blackout.)*

*(End of play.)*

# Notes:

## *Original Costume Reference Pictures*

(Pictures taken by Charlotte Williams)



### Base Layer:

- Yellow chemise
- Maroon corset
- Black skirt
- Black leggings
- Black booties

### Elizabeth Báthory Costume:

- Black headpiece (made from a scarf and a black t-shirt, with a ring sewn to the front)
- Dark brown wig
- Elizabeth Báthory Riding Gown (two pieces: a bodice and an overskirt)
- Bum roll
- Black skirt (deconstructed and sewn onto hoop skirt)

*Original Voices Recording Link and Notes on the Voices*

Link to Original Voices Recording: <https://youtu.be/xga5tFxtGII>

\*\*You may use the original recording or create your own for The Voices. Please email the playwright if you would like to use it, at [rachelalawhead@gmail.com](mailto:rachelalawhead@gmail.com) If you are creating your own, feel free to overlay The Voices in whatever creative way you want. As long as all the text is used, any artistic expression is allowed. The creator of this piece used the microphone on her computer to record herself and three other men (with two of them reading for two different parts), and combined them using GarageBand. The creeping piano music used underneath The Voices is Intervention by Scott Buckley. <https://www.free-stock-music.com/scott-buckley-intervention.html> The intense choral music used at the end of The Voices is Blood Covenant by Serge Narcissoff. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2fgMQIrNjE>

*Reference Pictures from Original Performance*

(Pictures taken by Ian McCarthy)



*Original Performance Recordings*

Links to Original Performance Recordings:

February 8<sup>th</sup> – [https://youtu.be/ABn9H\\_bQUGA](https://youtu.be/ABn9H_bQUGA)

February 10<sup>th</sup> – <https://youtu.be/mY4Fau9YMDU>

# Analysis

## **The Spark**

Before I can begin the more analytical, academic section of my summative analysis, I must be true to my artistic nature, and tell a story. It is the story of how this journey began.

December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017. My study abroad semester in London was almost over; it was almost time for me to head back to the United States. I was sitting in a plastic chair at a red table in the common area of the CAPA building, which was decorated with pseudo-edgy art and uncomfortable couches. Michael Punter, one of the BFA's main faculty in London, was sitting across from me, holding two gigantic mugs of Earl Grey tea.

He opened our meeting with an unexpected question, "So, what are you thinking about for your Free Play?"

In the final year of the BFA, the seniors have to do a project. Other than completing a proposal and a final paper, the project can be whatever we want. Want to put up an existing piece of theatre? Great. Want to write something and perform it? Awesome. Want to set up art gallery? Yup. Want to have people watch you watch TV and smoke cigars? Weird, but that still works. Anything is possible in a Free Play. This gives us a huge amount of freedom, a double-edged sword when it comes to artistic expression. I often find myself thriving under pressure. Limitation causes my creativity to blossom, inspiring me to find innovative solutions to difficult problems. The idea I could do anything for my Free Play was terrifying. Not to mention, as a student within the Honors Program, I was burdened with the additional stress of combining my thesis with my Free Play. I had locked myself into the mindset that my Free Play had to be incredibly important, meaningful, and artistically fulfilling. I was stuck, my thought process petrified, so I had decided to deal with what I was going to do for my Free Play later.

But later had come, sooner than I wanted, and I had nothing to say to Michael Punter's earnest question but, "I have no idea."

To my surprise, I did not see a look of disappointment cross his eager face.

"Alright! Then I have an idea for you! Have you heard of Countess Elizabeth Báthory?"

I had not.

"So Countess Elizabeth Báthory was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Transylvanian noblewoman who is most known for bathing in the blood of virgins to keep herself looking young and beautiful. She was also accused of murdering and torturing her servants. People think she may have been a vampire – she is known as Countess Dracula. She is remembered as being cruel, evil, and sadistic, but most likely, she was a strong widow and a woman in power, unjustly persecuted by the powerful men around her. And, you see, the moment when you walked into the classroom on the first day of class, I thought, Countess Elizabeth Báthory!"

Michael Punter continued on. He wanted me to develop a series of shows about women in power who have been villainized, presenting it like a choose-your-own-adventure show, where the audience would choose which woman I would represent. I would then deliver a defense as the villainess, with the intent of changing the audience's perspective, and at the end of the piece, the audience would vote on whether they were innocent or guilty of their crimes.

We spit-balled ideas back and forth for around an hour at this red table, building on each other's brainstorming. After the meeting was over, I was still riding high on Michael Punter's enthusiasm, but as the day went on, I slowly cooled to this idea. I wasn't as passionate about the legal structure and nature of the piece. I wasn't thrilled about having to write three individual shows that may never be seen. I wasn't sure how I would make this piece relevant. I wasn't

totally sold on this pitch, so like my other fledging Free Play ideas, I focused on finishing my semester in London, and as the months went on, I mostly forgot about it.

September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018. During my office hours as the BFA Peer, I noticed some of my company members were in the basement of Rarig, watching a live newsfeed of CNBC on their laptop. I had nothing important to do in the office, and had been avoiding the news all day, so I ventured out to join them.

On the screen, a middle-aged man was seated at a table in front of a thin black microphone. His nameplate read Brett M. Kavanaugh. He was defending himself against the allegations of Christine Blasey Ford, who had accused him of sexually assaulting her in the summer of 1982. This was the story I had been avoiding all day. Perhaps naively, I thought if I avoided getting invested, an outcome where he wasn't punished wouldn't hurt as much. Ford had testified earlier that morning while I was in class. I watched Kavanaugh scream and screech his way through a lukewarm defense, and felt like I was watching a toddler's temper tantrum. He was so utterly unbelievable, his guiltiness seemed to eke out of his pores. He was unprofessional, childish, rude, to the point where I no longer cared about his culpability, I did not respect him to hold the office of Supreme Court Justice. But as ridiculous as Kavanaugh was acting, my company members and I were scared. We had become all too familiar with the idea that unqualified men might face no political consequences for their horrible actions. Brimming with anger, trying to push away the feeling of hopelessness, I retreated back to my office. It was time for me to listen to Ford's testimony. I put in my headphones, searched for her testimony on YouTube, and pressed play.

A middle-aged blonde woman with thick black glasses greeted me. Her demeanor antithetical to Kavanaugh's, she calmly and collectedly recounted her trauma on national

television. At times, she bravely held back tears while describing the things Kavanaugh did to her.

“I was pushed onto the bed and Brett got on top of me. He began running his hands over my body and grinding his hips into me. I yelled, hoping that someone downstairs might hear me, and tried to get away from him, but his weight was heavy. Brett groped me and tried to take off my clothes... I believed he was trying to rape me. I tried to yell for help. When I did, Brett put his hand over my mouth to stop me from screaming. This was what terrified me the most, and has had the most lasting impact on my life. It was hard for me to breathe, and I thought that Brett was accidentally going to kill me.”

She talked about how the aftermath of the attack had rippled throughout the rest of her life. She talked about why she named her attacker after 30 years of public silence. She described the horrible effects going public had on herself and her family.

Then came the questioning. Some senators were rude, others were sympathetic, others were outraged for her. But the image that stayed with me to this day was an image shared all over social media, what Ford was looking at while she testified. A sea of white, conservative men.

I took out my headphones after watching Ford’s testimony, angry tears welling in my eyes. This brave woman spoke her truth, and yet I knew deep down, that it would amount to nothing. I wondered why this empowered, educated woman could not be believed, why we as a society still mistrust strong women.

All of a sudden, I remembered Michael Punter’s pitch. I remembered Countess Elizabeth Báthory. She was a woman in power, overpowered the men around her. She never got the chance to tell her story, to defend herself. The pieces came together. Her story was all too relevant to our

contemporary political moment. Now was the time to create this piece. Now was the time for Báthory to tell her story.

## **The Nitty Gritty**

When I finally settled on an idea, I did not give much thought initially to the intent of my project. I had spent so long struggling over what I wanted to do, when I was ready to start, I wanted to leap in with both feet forward. Eventually I realized that my intent for the project was to finish it. This may sound unacademic, but let me explain.

I have spent the past four years in the BFA Program completing projects assigned to me. Practice a scene, rehearse a play, perfect an accent— I am used to living in the rubric. Checking boxes and adhering to pre-established rules are tasks that come easily to me. But my Free Play was a chance for me to do something independent, to set deadlines and force myself to hold to them, without the guidance or pressure of someone else telling me what to do. This project granted me total freedom, a concept I still found terrifying even after I had an actual idea. I knew how grueling Senior Year was going to be. I knew how procrastination had spelled doom for me in the past. My intent in pursuing this project was to complete it on my own, fully realized to the best of my ability, and to prove to myself that I am able to work as an independent artist and still find success. I was also excited to have an opportunity to combine my dramaturgy, playwrighting, and acting into one piece. I mostly have opportunities to explore myself as an actor in the BFA. I have been able to practice skills adjacent to dramaturgy through pursuing my English minor. But I've never attempted to write a play. And I've never tried to do anything where I combined all three of those roles. For my Free Play, I was ready to challenge myself in a multi-disciplinary way, in an arena where there was no giving up. This project was mandatory, I had to come out of it with something. It was up to me, and me alone, to make this project something I could be proud of in the end.

Much like the intent, I did not begin this project with one question I sought to answer. In fact, it would be inaccurate to say that I focused on one question throughout my process. I had many questions, inquiries, and curiosities while I traversed through this artistic journey. The inherent nature of creating new work is changeable, mutable, and ever-shifting. As I approached each step of the making of my piece, I was inundated with new questions, and the old ones became somewhat irrelevant. Each new stage of the process utilized a different part of my brain or my artistic instrument, therefore it makes sense why my perspective shifted so many times. But I did have one question that arced over me throughout this process. When I first was inspired by Christine Blasey Ford's testimony, and was reminded of Báthory's story, I asked myself "What is it about subversive femininity that makes it inherently untrustworthy?" As I began to speak this question aloud, and tell more and more people about my idea, I less pretentiously asked "Why can't we trust strong women?" This question lit a fire in the back of my mind and kept me going as I faced the incoming struggles.

This question of mistrusting strong women is of interest to others in my field because of the nature of theatre. I believe it is the job of the theatre to hold the mirror up to society, forcing us to confront the issues we have suppressed. As humans living in the United States, we are still struggling against the embedded patriarchal structures that have shaped our society. My question seeks to answer why we as human beings mistrust strong women, women who are outside the bounds of stereotypical female expression. By exploring this question, I am delving into the realm of bias, of stereotype, of subconscious preference, which is an uncomfortable realm for people to think about. I am pushing boundaries and trying to untie tight knots within the heads of my audience, in order to push them to realize the problematic nature of their own deeply held beliefs.

The broader significance of this question relates to the cultural moment we are experiencing politically and socially. In 2016, Hillary Clinton was chosen as the Democratic Party's nominee, and faced a deluge of criticism, scandals, and backlash. She won the popular vote, but lost the election to an unqualified, most likely sexist and racist, charismatic reality TV star. Who, for good measure, was caught on tape bragging about his sexual conquests, including how he "grabbed them by the p\*\*\*\*y," which was released less than a month prior to the election. The American people may not fully support this man, his behavior, or his views, but he still occupies the most powerful executive position in our government. This aligns with the rising tide of fascist sentiment rippling across the Western World. There are pockets of people with harsh views against women, and anyone who does not conform to the "norm," who are gaining a platform of legitimacy. However, there are also pockets of people who are being taken more seriously for the first time in history. Thanks to the influence of social media, sexual assault victims are starting to be heard, and their assaulters are being held more accountable for their actions, at least in the court of public opinion. The #MeToo movement has been wildly popular, with thousands of women, men, and non-binary folks coming forward with their stories. Public male figures are beginning to face more consequences for their deeds. Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, Al Franken, the list goes on and on. However, not all men have been held to the same standard of accountability, and accusations of doubt have been fired back towards those accusing men of sexual assault. For example, Christine Blasey Ford bravely told her story about Brett Kavanaugh in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee in September of 2018, reminiscent of Anita Hill doing the same for Clarence Thomas years earlier. However, in both cases, the outcome was the same. The men faced no consequences. Ford retreated from the public eye, just like Hillary Clinton did post-election. None of these women were able to

convince the public they could be trusted. The notion of a strong woman being doubted, questioned, or outright mocked is not a foreign one, even in places filled with so-called civil debate. As far as we have come, men and women still struggle to gain true equality in our society. The patriarchy works in more subtle ways now. There is still an attitude of mistrust associated with women in power, strong women are still considered to be a threat. Christine Blasey Ford was questioned endlessly about her memories, and always approached with an attitude of doubt. It was Ford's testimony that convinced me of the relevancy of this project in the first place. I could not forget the picture of what she had to look at while she gave her testimony: a wall of uncaring, uninterested white men. The idea of a strong woman speaking her truth reminded me of Elizabeth Báthory, and inspired me to pursue this project and this question. It was my goal to use the story of the Countess to secretly mask my true intention of making my audience examine our contemporary moment. I would use Elizabeth's narrative to introduce the idea of subversive femininity and mistrust of powerful women, only to then flip it to the present in the last few minutes of the piece. This link to the present is how I would make my piece gain broader significance, and leave a lasting impact on my audience.

I was greatly inspired by the works of Brazilian activist Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed, as well as the broader practices of Forum Theatre. Augusto Boal developed his techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed over the course of forty years of work in different parts of the world as a revolutionary, a teacher, and a dramatist. Through the use of a series of exercises, games, and dramatic devices, Theatre of the Oppressed seeks to create an understanding of a social reality, then inspire the ability to change it. Within Theatre of the Oppressed, there is no room for the passive spectator, only willing actors. Boal originally wanted to create a space for rehearsing the future, and as he turned more revolutionary, he used his tool

as a basis for altering society through legislation and political action. Forum Theatre was developed in Latin America to tackle the overriding problems of the lives of ordinary people. It was designed to give agency to the oppressed and allow them to brainstorm solutions to real problems affecting their community. A Forum performance is facilitated by a “Joker,” or a mediator. The Joker begins with a few exercises and games aimed to inspire creativity and participation. The actors then perform a piece where a “Protagonist,” the oppressed person, is destroyed by an “Antagonist,” the oppressor. The Joker then encourages the audience members, or “spect-actors,” to offer alternatives to the Protagonist, shout “Stop,” and replace the actor to try out a possible solution. This continues, and together, the actors and the spect-actors brainstorm as a community and rehearse their revolution.

My main encounter with Forum Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed came while I was studying in London. Under the instruction of Michael Punter, and a representative from Cardboard Citizens, a group who uses techniques of Forum Theatre while working with people who’ve experienced homelessness in London, my company and I completed a unit focused on Forum Theatre. We were split into groups to create pieces about globalization, which we would present at the annual CAPA conference in November, as well as for a group of business students from Colgate that Michael Punter taught in a class about appreciating theatre. My group was assigned “Soda,” and we created a piece about the exploitation of Coca-Cola workers in Columbia. Our piece was flawed in many ways, but it acted as an introduction of certain key concepts that would become fundamental to my project in the end. It was this project that gave Michael Punter faith I could execute his pitch about Elizabeth Báthory successfully. During our presentation, the business students from Colgate were more upset by our piece than us liberal, free-thinking theatre-types expected. They scoffed at our portrayal of unions as a positive escape

route for worker exploitation, and insisted we were ignoring the benefits of capitalism. When Michael Punter, acting as our Joker, invited them to participate and become spect-actors, many of them refused to leave their seats. One of the few people who participated at all was their professor, who replaced another actor as a worker on the “assembly line” with me and staunchly tried to insert his politics into the mouthpiece of his character. I held my own against this middle-aged man, arguing fiercely while staying within the bounds of my character and the circumstances we were in. I must have held my own, because Michael Punter proposed a piece for my Free Play where I would argue the whole time. Because of my exposure to Forum Theatre, I was inspired by the idea of an audience becoming active, allowing them to analyze and transform the reality they are living in. Like Boal, I wanted to break down the barriers between the actors and the audience. I was also very inspired by the concept of the Joker, who is represented in my brain by a tweed-clad Michael Punter. I was also drawn to the idea of collective community brain-storming. In my piece, I planned to introduce the legend of Elizabeth Báthory as an objective Joker, and my audience would help decide the outcome of my piece by participating in a vote for innocent or guilty.

My approach to this topic is unique. My project is a multi-disciplinary piece that links historical exploration with contemporary analysis, feminist theory with period acting, and Forum Theatre with the structure of a legal proceeding. The way I have chosen to analyze my question of “Why do we mistrust strong women” is one of a kind, and thus gives more weight and importance to my piece and its outcome as a whole.

## The Process

As any good dramaturg should, I started with research. I took a deep breath and went on a Google deep dive about Countess Elizabeth Báthory, reading all the articles, blog posts, conspiracy theories, and horror stories I could stomach. Then I turned to more scholarly sources. I read *Countess Elizabeth Báthory: The Life and Legacy of History's Most Prolific Female Serial Killer*, written by Charles River Editors, to get the most mainstream, basic opinion of Báthory and her crimes. I read excerpts from Tony Thorne's *Countess Dracula: The Life and Times of Elisabeth Bathory, the Blood Countess*; Leslie Carroll's *Royal Pains: A Rogues' Gallery of Brats, Brutes, and Bad Seeds*; Lisa Kroger's *Encyclopedia of the Vampire: The Living Dead in Myth, Legend, and Popular Culture*; Robert Eigheten-Bisang and Elizabeth Miller's *Bram Stoker's Notes for Dracula: A Facsimile Edition*; and Peter Vronsky's *Female Serial Killers: How and Why Women Become Monsters*; all of which gave me a clear picture of the evidence against Báthory and the cultural baggage that comes along with her. I then read both of Kimberly L. Craft's books, *Infamous Lady: The True Story of Countess Erzsébet Báthory* and *The Private Letters of Countess Erzsébet Báthory*, which contained around forty letters written by or on behalf of the Countess. Craft painstakingly translated them from the old Hungarian, along with providing historical, political, social and religious context. These letters paint a very different picture of the Countess—it shows the mundane administrative duties of a noblewoman managing her land and her people. I then read *No Blood in the Water: The Legal and Gender Conspiracies Against Countess Elizabeth Bathory in Historical Context*, a thesis by Rachael Leigh Bledsaw. From this, I gathered more historical context about the time period Báthory lived in, and I learned that there are many inconsistencies between the stories, to the point that the timeline of Báthory's legend became very integral to the later argument of my piece. Overall, the most

important thing I learned throughout all of my research is that there was not a lot of conclusive evidence about Báthory's crimes. However, there were a host of opinions and stories about her, some of which were incredibly strong-willed and held fast, but often based on nothing but legend and rumor.

After I felt I had completed a sufficient amount of research, I started to write my first draft. I created a few different outlines, determining the perfect structure for my piece, and focused first on writing the Joker's sections and "The Voices" section, which both came relatively easily to me. I had difficulty writing Báthory's section, which ironically was going to be the largest percentage of the eventual piece. After one of my first meetings with my main thesis advisor, Michal Kobialka, he told me I was trying to write Báthory's defense as a biography, and I needed to refocus my argument and let it become an active defense. I allowed myself to take my time with Báthory's section, and by the beginning of second semester, I was almost finished with all three sections of my script. Michal gave me more invaluable advice during the writing and editing process. Again focusing on Bathory's section, he told me to cut down on my wordiness, and sharpen my defense. This not only provided a better contrast between Báthory's speech and the speech of "The Voices", but also let me hone my writing to say exactly what I wanted without the extra fluff. My script went from thirty pages to under twenty in one editing session. When I was finished writing, and I had a draft that was satisfactory, it was time for me to begin memorizing and preparing to perform my piece.

My rehearsal process began by recording "The Voices." I recruited three of my male company members, to record all of "The Voices," except for the Biography, which I recorded myself. David O'Connell read for the Amateur and György, Peter Farr read for the Legal and the Sexist, and Domino D'Lorion read for the Sadist. I then taught myself how to use GarageBand,

combining and overlaying the recordings along with two other royalty free pieces of music, trying to tell the most concise and clear story I could. However, I still went through multiple drafts of making “The Voices.” Originally, it was going to be much shorter, but the story was less understandable because the recordings overlapped too much. With the help and advice of Michal, as well as Tori Johnson and Charlotte Williams, the two company members tasked to help me tech my show, I made edits to “The Voices,” which made it much longer. This proved to be a blessing, as it provided me more time for my quick change from the Joker to Báthory. Eventually, “The Voices” section was edited, modified, and exported, ready for the performances to come.

Originally, I thought my Joker costume was going to resemble something out of Michael Punter’s wardrobe, as my idea of the Joker was inextricably linked to him. His “uniform” was a pair of jeans, a button-down shirt and a tweed vest, always armed with an earnest expression. For Báthory’s costume, I planned on wearing a shift dress, essentially a nightgown, perhaps a corset, and a wig, as if she were under house arrest within her tower. I wanted to wear something resembling the outfit she was most likely found in when she died. But while I was searching for shift dresses on Etsy, I typed in “Elizabeth Báthory” on a whim, and was rewarded with the search result, “Elizabeth Báthory Riding Gown.” Someone had made a costume inspired by the Countess for a Renaissance Faire in 2010, worn it once, then never again. And there was one still available. I was set on having that dress, and as a result, my vision for the show was completely changed. After buying, I waited for the package to arrive, and began to prep the auxiliary items I would now need to complete my full look. I found a brown wig off of Amazon, which matched the images and the portraits of Báthory I’d seen. I dragged my hoop skirt out of my closet, which I had borrowed from my friend Lily Jones for my work at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival. I

messed my friend Kate Smokowicz to help me make a period-appropriate headdress, and she sent me step-by-step instructions of how to construct it. I already owned a yellow chemise and a maroon corset. When the riding gown arrived, I realized I had made a mistake. I thought that the dress came with an underskirt, but all that was included was the overskirt and the bodice. The overskirt was too long for my body and the bodice was too short for my torso, which I blame on inaccurate sizing. The lack of an underskirt was my fault, as there was a disclaimer on the Etsy page. I blame my excitement and impulsiveness for that mistake. Not wanting to give up my vision, I launched into problem-solving mode. I borrowed a black skirt from Lily Jones, my friend who had provided my hoop skirt. I hoped that skirt would work as an underskirt, but it proved to be too short and it didn't have a large enough bell to fit around the hoop skirt. I returned to Etsy, and bought a new black underskirt, and waited with my fingers crossed. When it arrived, my heart sank when I realized that it also had too small of a bell. I was beginning to enter panic-mode. I cut the new black underskirt apart along the seam, leaving the drawstring waist intact, and hand-sewed the bottom of the skirt to the hoopskirt. It was around this time during the process that I wished I knew how to use a sewing machine. My plan worked, but I ran into a whole different set of problems. When the hoopskirt was tied around my waist, it was too short and didn't even come close to hitting the ground. The overskirt also looked comically long, and the difference between the lengths of the skirts became very apparent. In the end, I came up with a convoluted, but effective solution. For my Joker costume, I wore the yellow chemise, the maroon corset, the black skirt from my friend Lily, black leggings, and black bootie heels. I developed an elaborate preset and dressing order with Charlotte to do the quick change into Báthory in the most effective manner. After the Joker's introduction and as "The Voices" recording began, I would leave the stage and quickly close the dressing room door behind me.

We had preset the black skirt-hoop-skirt combination on the floor in the middle of the room, and I would step into it, pull it up over the black skirt I was already wearing, and tie both drawstrings around my hips. The combination of this skirt hybrid with the other black skirt from Lily created the illusion of a full black underskirt from my waist to the floor, from the audience's perspective. We would then tie the overskirt over that, so all the skirts met near the ground. We would slip the bodice over my head, which was loosely pre-tied, and then tightened it to fit my body. I would slip the headdress on over my head and place it around my neck while I would don the brown wig, slipping the headdress into place afterwards. I would gather the rest of the wig and clip it back into a bun with the gold clip. I would then rush over to the mirror, and darken my eyebrows to match the wig and add a matching maroon lipstick to my mouth. With a final look of approval from Charlotte, I would slowly walk back out on stage, setting myself up for the later reveal after the conclusion of "The Voices."

Memorizing my piece was easier than I expected. Most of the memorization happened during the Polar Vortex in January, so I decided to pace around my living room, reading and then learning my script line by line, slowly adding more lines until I could recite the whole thing. This process was very time efficient, and I only took about a week to memorize the entire script. Jill Walmsley-Zager, one of the Voice teachers in the BFA, provided me with her Hungarian accent cheat sheet, and I added that dialect into my speech as I memorized. I chose to add a slight Hungarian affect to Báthory's voice to distinguish it from my voice as the Joker, and to aid in my transformation into the Countess.

While the process of tech can be a stressful and difficult part of the theatrical process, my tech rehearsals proved to be quite easy. I had a total of six cues: four light and two sound. Two of my company members, Tori and Charlotte, were assigned to help me with my Free Play tech.

After quickly running through the tech cues with Tori and practicing the quick change with Charlotte, I used the rest of my time during tech to run my piece. During one of my final tech rehearsals, my main advisor Michal saw the show for the first time, after reading my drafts for months. I was very nervous, and worried Michal would tear my performance apart, a devastating outcome as I would open only two days afterwards. But my worries were nothing more than anxious fears, and he instead gave me incredibly helpful and implementable notes. He told me that as the Joker, I was showing too much of my own personal bias and knowledge about the topic, which could unfairly influence my audience's opinion. I needed to refocus on staying neutral, especially in my delivery and my manner. He also advised that I incorporate the concept of Brecht's alienation effect into this aspect of my performance. The alienation effect, or "Verfremdungseffekt," is a principle used and developed by Bertolt Brecht to provoke a social-critical audience response through the use of innovative theatrical techniques. It is the idea that a theatre-maker can draw attention to their own theatricality and expose the falseness therein, allowing the audience to critically engage with the meaning rather than falling into the trap of emotional manipulation. By encouraging me to integrate the alienation effect into my Joker, I think Michal was trying to call me out for emotionally influencing my audience's decision in a particular direction. I needed to remember that my Joker was an impartial entity and a theatrical device, and my audience needed to fully understand this as well. Michal also told me that while my accent and physical characterization of the Countess was going in the right direction, I was falling into the trap of being too emotional while I pleaded her innocence. To accurately portray this character, she needed to be stoic and unapproachable. I pondered and practiced Michal's notes during the following day, and was back for my first dress rehearsal that night. After finishing the piece, I asked Tori and Charlotte for their notes on my performance. They remarked

that while I implemented Michal's notes very effectively, I had gone a step too far. I was no longer sounding biased as the Joker, but I was acting more robotic than alienating. I didn't seem human, I sounded like a machine rattling off a monotone monologue. My Countess was very stoic and not emotional, but my performance had lost the variety and multi-faceted nature it had before. I thanked my friends for their notes, and spent the next day trying to find a balance between these critiques. During my final dress rehearsal, I focused on straddling the gap between biased and robotic for the Joker, and emotional and boring for the Countess. I tried to present my material as the Joker like a teacher. I was there to enlighten the audience, not to sway their opinion. As the Countess, I let my emotions bubble under the surface of my imposing exterior. I let them take me on a journey without fully submitting to them, always maintaining a steady and cold demeanor. Tori and Charlotte congratulated me on reaching a middle ground, and I finally felt ready to perform my piece. With all the elements complete and fully realized, it was time for Báthory to make her debut.

My piece was first in the order of Free Play weekend. It was Friday February 8<sup>th</sup>, and I had a full docket to accomplish before my performance even crossed my mind. I picked up my car from the Auto Body Shop at 7:30 in the morning, had lunch with the Senior Dramaturg at the Guthrie at noon, had class at the Guthrie from 2:30 until 4:30, and finally, I was free to prepare for my evening. I skipped dinner, and instead came straight to Rarig from the Guthrie to warm up. I preset my costume in the dressing room so it was ready for the quick change, and changed into my Joker attire as I did my makeup. I pulled my hair back into a tight bun, and laced and tied my constricting corset. My show was set to start at 7, but I was ready to go by 6:30. I was nervous, but excited to show my work to an actual audience. I could hear the crowd murmuring in the house as I waited backstage. Most of them had no idea what to expect from this piece. It

was so different from anything I had done in the past. Deb Pearson, after announcing the kickoff for Free Play weekend, introduced my piece as “Rachel Lawhead’s Free Play!” As I started to take the space, I heard the audience applauding, but a hush fell as I entered. I looked like myself, but there was something different about me as I reached center stage. I walked with more confidence, I held myself with poise, and stood fully in my power. As I began my speech as the Joker, I thought about speaking like an objective source, a storyteller, a mediator. The audience reacted to this, and I could feel them leaning in, listening with rapt attention. When I asked them if they had heard anything about Elizabeth Báthory, my audience was lively and full of opinions. There were several in the crowd who clearly had pre-existing biases against the Countess. They were armed with damning anecdotes about her, some of which made the audience “Ooooh.” Rather than falling into the trap of becoming defensive, I acknowledged their knowledge, but pushed on. I had a job to do. I had a story to tell. After the conclusion of the Joker’s section, I left the stage, and quickly stepped into the dressing room for the quick-change. I could hear the audience reacting to the familiar voices of their classmates in “The Voices” recording. There were times when they would laugh at a certain line because of a way it was said, ignoring the sometimes quite unfunny content. I tried to ignore the intrusive, doubting thoughts, and slowly made my way back onstage as quietly as possible, placing myself center stage. When the lights came up, perfectly timed with the swell of the terrifying choral music, I noticed a few people in the audience jumped as Báthory was revealed. If they thought I was holding myself differently as the Joker, then as Báthory, I was unrecognizable. The nerves began to start again, but I instead gave myself over to Báthory during this section of the performance. I focused on defending myself in front of this crowd of people, focused on finding sympathetic and not-so-sympathetic eyes to connect with, focused on telling my story as plainly as possible. There were a few

moments in this first performance where I went up on a line or two, which kept me on my feet and helped keep me present. By the end of the defense, I was curious and excited for what the voting section of the play was going to be like. Because of the nature of my piece, I had never rehearsed this section. After Báthory's last line, I chose a person to stare at for five, never-ending seconds, then immediately began taking off my wig and headdress. The audience was absolutely silent. After the wig was unstuck from my hair, I looked up into the crowd and said, "So." I placed the costume pieces I was shedding on the ground, and asked them to raise their hands high if they thought she was guilty. Someone shouted from the audience, "By our standards or theirs?" I was unused to my audience firing back at me, it was something the rehearsal process had not prepared me for. Off the top of my head, I responded, "Whatever floats your boat." This was the first time the audience laughed since Báthory was cracking vampire jokes, and it was here I felt the audience relax and become more comfortable. I could see people were struggling to make the choice. Someone else in the crowd asked "Guilty of what? Of all 650 people?" and the same person who had originally spoken responded, "Even one makes her guilty." I answered, "Whatever you choose to believe," trying to maintain the Joker's unbiased nature. That same outspoken person yelled out again, "Innocent or guilty does not detract from the excellent pathos of the soliloquy you just gave." Eventually, I was able to remove all of the costume pieces and I then started to count the number of hands for guilty. This was harder than I expected, the lighting I had chosen made counting the hands more difficult. After I was done counting the guilty votes, I asked the audience to raise their hands high if they thought she was innocent. There were little to no outbursts in this one, but I was still struggling to count the hands. The votes for guilty and the votes for innocent were closer than I had anticipated during this first performance, but the votes for innocent won the day. I then asked those who voted innocent to explain why. People

began shouting out their explanations: no evidence, unreliable source material, the level of inconsistencies in the evidence, her position as a woman in power, dubious means of gathering the evidence, the motives against her, etc. Those who thought she was guilty began to shout things at me again, so I transitioned and asked those who thought she was guilty to voice their opinion. They did not disappoint: her power, her privilege, the violent time period, her motivations, her mental health, etc. After the conclusion of the voting, I began the final speech, where I linked the story of Báthory to our contemporary moment. I could feel the audience on the edges of their seats, following my train of thought as I poked holes in their subconscious ways of thinking. I spoke my final line, and the lights went down. The audience cheered and greeted me with a standing ovation.

The second performance was two days later, on Sunday February 10<sup>th</sup>. This time, Deb announced my piece as “The Trial of Countess Elizabeth Báthory.” My audience was less opinionated and less boisterous than they were during the first show. I had different spots in my performance as Báthory where I went up on my lines, which was interesting, but also made me feel connected and in the moment. After Báthory’s section, I removed my wig again, and asked the audience to raise their hands if they thought she was guilty. To my surprise, only three people raised their hands, and I prompted the audience with, “You have to vote, there is no in-between.” I kept waiting for more people to switch and decide guilty, based on the way my first audience had primed me. But no one did, and I then asked the audience to raise their hands for innocent. The rest of the house raised their hands, after some minor prodding from me. I asked those who voted innocent to explain why: rumors and stories cannot be trusted as sources, the most salacious parts of the story came later, they wanted her to be innocent, reasonable doubt, etc. And I did likewise for those who voted guilty: this was a trial and we only heard her side of the

defense; everyone has a motive and if she was guilty, she has the strongest motive; violence then is different than violence now; guilty now versus then is different, etc. This audience seemed less eager to interrupt and talk over each other, but also were more thoughtful in their answers. I moved on to my final section, and noticed that as I spoke about the modern women who had been destroyed, especially Christine Blasey Ford, I started to become a little emotional. I tried to push my tears away, and refocused on the neutrality of the Joker. I'm not sure I was successful in this. I finished the piece, recited my final line "And instead of destroying empowered women, destroy the systems that empowered their destruction," and I heard snaps as the lights went down.

## **The Aftermath**

The first thing I felt after the conclusion of my Free Play was sadness. I was glad I was finished, and could focus on all of the other assignments I had been neglecting, but I was sad to let Báthory's spirit go. She had been living inside of me for months, as I was researching, writing, rehearsing, and performing, taking up residence inside of my heart and fueling me forward as I worked on my Free Play. I was done, and she had to leave. I had resurrected her for those two performances, she was able to see and hear and breathe again in this mortal plain through me. As I watch the recordings of my performance, I can see her in my eyes, pleading her innocence through my voice. In fact, watching myself in those recordings made me feel incredibly proud of the work I did in my Free Play.

For my Joker, I think I found a very strong, compelling character, one that I hope I can carry into my professional life in the future. I thought I used the alienation effect well in my delivery and demeanor. I was most impressed that when my audience became particularly rowdy, I did not struggle to regain control. Instead, I let the moment happen, let the audience die down, then retook the reigns. I felt like I was guiding the discussion rather than manhandling it. I also think I found the balance between unbiased and emotionally manipulative, which was something I struggled with in the rehearsal process.

For Báthory, I have no words. Since the performance, I have had so many people tell me I fully transformed into the Countess. They said I disappeared, and it felt like Erzsébet Báthory was in the room with them. As Báthory, I feel like I surrendered and allowed her spirit to take over my body for twenty minutes. I committed so highly to an affect, to a posture, and to a character, and I am over the moon that it paid off. I definitely found success in my portrayal of Báthory, and it only makes me want to continue working on this piece in the future.

If I have to criticize myself for anything, I wish I could have “rehearsed” the elements more based in Forum than I did. I was slightly blindsided at the rambunctious nature of my first audience, and did not entirely know what to do in order to keep them on track. But the fact that I thought there was a track to stick to shows that I was not fully comfortable allowing my audience to become spect-actors with me. As a result of my first audience, I was then let down that my second audience was not as outspoken. In the future, I think the first audience is the ideal outcome my piece should inspire. I loved sparking an idea and watching the fire of debate spread across the audience. I want to inspire people to think and argue and open their circle to include another person’s differing opinion. I hope that in the future, I can double down and help cultivate an atmosphere of that quality.

The work I did to create this piece was incredibly fulfilling, and I couldn’t be more proud of myself. I did it. I reached my goal. I wrote a one-woman show. I revived a dead Countess. I incited discussions in both of the audiences I performed for. In fact, if I made one person reconsider the way they think, even for a second, I know I succeeded.

This project contributed to the current state of knowledge in our field by adding another voice. I possess a unique perspective, and I decided to apply that unique perspective to an odd topic about a long dead, infamous woman. The way I went about my project, and the time, care, and effort I spent is my contribution. More knowledge about Elizabeth Báthory, and her surprising relevance in our politically loaded moment, is my contribution. I am a link in the chain, and although it is small, it is still a lengthening. The piece I created is my contribution, because it might inspire someone else to continue my work, or think about my question. My voice is my contribution. The hopeful continuation of my piece in the future is my contribution. The spark I lit in my audience is my contribution.

As to the answer to my question, “Why do we mistrust strong women?” or “What is about subversive femininity that makes it inherently untrustworthy?” I have no answer. Let me explain. Throughout my process, I slowly realized it is not my job to answer my question. The goal of Forum Theatre is to collectively face a problem in a community and brainstorm answers, but the answers are never the goal. The goal is the coming together of an oppressed people, it is the rallying cry, it is the ripple in the pond that signals a tide of change. In my piece, I spoke about the nature of truth. I asserted that the truth doesn’t exist, the true story of Countess Erzsébet Báthory doesn’t exist. My research and dedication to historical accuracy doesn’t ultimately matter, what matters is what the audience believes and decides to be true. The narrative chosen by the audience is what will survive. In a very similar way, I realized that the question that drove me to complete this project was not mine to answer. I realized that as a theatre artist, it is not my job to answer questions. It is my job to ask them. It is my job as a dramaturg to open minds. It is my job as a playwright to open eyes. It is my job as an actor to open hearts. The job of the artist is to pose questions to their audience and leave them with the responsibility of answering them. The theatre is a nebulous art form, and to me, exists in the space between the actor and the audience. That is where my questions live. I breathe them out, and my audience breathes them in. And whether they produce answers doesn’t matter. The questions still linger. They still stay in the minds of my audience. After my audience leaves the theatre, perhaps a week later, while washing dishes or driving to work, they think about my piece. And for a second, they question their own methods of thinking. That is what I work for. That is how I change minds. That is how artists change the world. By changing the way that people think, by giving them the tools to change how they believe, and by prodding them down the path of revolution.

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