

Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

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Episode Guide

Season 4, Episode 1 The Changeling: Violent Intimacy

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A note on content: This episode will discuss sexual violence, intimacy, concept of virginity, purity culture, and violence including the severing of limbs.

Bonus Material

Find out more about special guest Charlene V. Smith, artistic director of Brave Spirits Theatre, by visiting her website (<u>www.CharleneVSmith.com</u>). Please also listen to BST's extraordinary Shakespeare's Histories in Audio wherever you get your podcasts or here on Youtube:

(https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_kCby9TwdJI53OR0C4KCsH7tnTD4yI4G

Episode Resources

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- Gowing, Laura. Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London. Paperback ed, Clarendon Press, 1996.
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- Films for the Humanities & Sciences (Firm), et al. *Thomas Middleton and William Rowley: The Changeling.* Films Media Group, 2005, http://digital.films.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?aid=4399&xtid=7298.
- Middleton, Thomas. "BBC Play of the Month: The Changeling (1974)". Youtube, uploaded by Andrea Keefa, 23 September 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JU-ni2cuHkE
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Episode Transcript

GRAY: There's a common saying in theatre that if two actors are within a foot of each other on stage, that they'll either kiss or kill each other. But what if it's both? Hi, my name is Gray Casterline, my pronouns are he/they, and I'm a fight choreographer with five years of experience.

SCARLET: And I'm Scarlet Frishman, my pronouns are she/they, and I'm an intimacy choreographer with 3 years of experience, who also dabbles in combat. Today we'll be taking you through a deep dive of the violence and intimacy within Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling*.

GRAY: *The Changeling* is a Jacobean tragedy filled to the brim with sex, violence, and blasphemy. This episode will discuss sexual violence & intimacy, concept of virginity, purity culture, and violence including the severing of limbs. Take care of yourself!

SCARLET: To summarize the changeling in the briefest words possible, it is a play about Beatrice-Joanna and her journey through love, life, and autonomy. To escape a marriage she doesn't want to be in she has a "dog faced" man, De Flores, murder her fiancé. This begins her road to tragedy, with De Flores taking her virginity as his payment for the murder and both Beatrice and De Flores losing their lives.

GRAY: There is also an entire B-plot that is not relevant to our focus within this episode. (if you want to hear about the B plot, we suggest listening to the companion episode on *The Changeling* from this season of Writ In the Margins!)

SCARLET: This play stars a very strong female character and her actions are really important to the plot. This girlboss led our early modern scholarly minds to think about feminist theory and how it overlaps with this play.

GRAY: Thinking about Beatrice-Joanna makes me reconsider what virginity and chastity meant when this play was written and feminist scholar Laura Gowing immediately jumped to mind.

SCARLET: Ah, Laura! Her work is fantastic. Were you thinking about any of her writing in particular?

GRAY: Yes—"Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London" looks at court documents from the period for a deep dive on gendered language, showing how women were held to crazy high standards in comparison to men.

SCARLET: Marriage and chastity were basically the center of the female experience, right? That sounds highly applicable to this particular play.

GRAY: Yes, exactly!

SCARLET: So the patriarchy is evil, as we all know, and early modern society's value of virginity pretty much only benefitted husbands and fathers. Gowing says in that same book, quote: "Studies of sexual honour... have tended to be one-sided. A system of honour that valorizes female chastity protects the property of husbands" (Gowing, "Domestic" 113). End Quote.

GRAY: Yuck! And that's exactly what Beatrice Joanna goes through in *The Changeling*, cause doesn't she get put through two different rounds of questioning about her virginity?

SCARLET: Yes! First Alsemero makes her take a special medicine that is supposed to tell him if she is a virgin or not.

GRAY: And then at the end of the play he interrogates her again, making her confess to the murder, the bed trick, and sleeping with De Flores.

SCARLET: God forbid a woman do anything.

GRAY: Right? And Gowing even writes about that exact thing in *Domestic Dangers*, stating, quote: "... the established female virtues - chastity and fertility - could be played off against suggestions of dishonesty" (Gowing 76).

SCARLET: They held women to these crazy high standards and then used those standards against them even if they were followed completely. Poor Beatrice Joanna.

GRAY: Gowing has another book, *Gender Relations In Early Modern England*, which talks about how femininity as a whole was discredited because there was a belief that being masculine was the "norm". This meant that men didn't have to obey the rules of gender the way that women did, including being basically exempt from silly ideas like chastity and virginity. Gowing states that quote "Part of the code of gender is that women carry it and men do not: men are the norm against which everything else is measured. Compared to the often blindingly clear rules of femininity, those of masculinity are often less immediately apparent" (4-5).

SCARLET: Yeah and because of that it's almost like Beatrice Joanna loses her personhood when she loses her virginity. Not only was the Jacobean era ruled by a king, but because the typical household structure was strictly patriarchal, the man of the house got to act like a mini-king over his own family.

GRAY: This absolute lack of freedom and control is what drives Beatrice Joanna to need De Flores' help committing Alonso's murder in the first place. She doesn't want to marry him, and she has to go to extremes to avoid that fate because her dad has complete control over her life until she gets married, and then that control transfers to her husband.

SCARLET: And there's a little deep dive on how feminist theory interacts with The Changeling! To combine this feminist lens with early modern theatre, we will be looking at three productions of Middleton's *The Changeling* and examining how the narratives of violence and intimacy are told through each production. The specific moments we'll be highlighting are Alonso Piraquo's murder, Beatrice's bed trick, and the closet scene.

GRAY: Our first production is the 1974 BBC's Play of the Month production. Fun Fact: the term intimacy choreography was first used in 2006 by Tonia Sina, co-founder of Intimacy Directors International and creator of the Intimacy for the Stage method, which means this production came long before Intimacy Choreographers officially existed. This star studded cast includes Helen Mirrin as Beatrice-Joanna, Brian Cox as Alsemero, and Stanley Baker as De Flores.

SCARLET: First, let's talk about the murder. Piraquo's murder happens in a dimly lit, well-removed part of the castle. As Alonso looks out of a small window, De Flores unsheaths a hidden dagger from his shirt & strikes Alonso in the back. The dying Alonso turns to De Flores, questioning him, as De Flores holds him in his arms and finally delivers the killing strike- another violent stab right into Alonso's chest.

GRAY: Despite the use of sharp weaponry, there is no blood to be seen in this production, leaving the not-so-blood-stained De Flores looking crisp and clean in his white shirt after the murder. Alonso's finger was severed just off-camera, but there certainly was a prop finger used, as we see De Flores put it in a handkerchief

before he drags Alonso's body off. When De Flores shows Beatrice Alonso's finger, he respectfully shows it to her from within the handkerchief.

SCARLET: The scene wherein Beatrice finds out that De Flores wants her virginity as payment clearly shows a De Flores that is MAD and not afraid to let it out physically. Interestingly enough, Beatrice had some extratextual violence, as she hit De Flores when she told him to leave. Then he physically stops her from leaving when she makes an attempt herself. After Beatrice calls De Flores a villain, he becomes angry and grabs her by the face while he delivers his lines, eventually throwing her onto the floor. This scene ends with some extratextual intimacy as well, and the chosen actions (which we won't describe here) show De Flores' complete control over Beatrice.

GRAY: The bed trick is not seen on screen in this version, which aligns with the original text. However, this production makes the decision that Beatrice does start to return De Flores's affections at this point in the story, as there are multiple kisses shared between the two while De Flores formulates a plan for forcing Diaphanta out of Alsemero's bed. Although the bed trick is not seen, Diaphanta's murder actually is. Textually, we hear a gunshot and De Flores enters with Diaphanta's body. In this production, we explicitly see De Flores shoot Diaphanta with a rifle.

SCARLET: In the beginning of the scene where Alsemero confronts Beatrice-Joanna about her honesty, they are both in their bed. Beatrice attempts to leave the bed after he calls her a "whore" and he grapples her, choking her until she confesses. Alsemero's closet is simply his bedroom in this production, which is in agreement with the early modern meaning of the word closet.

GRAY: So, Beatrice Joanna is... gay?

SCARLET: Very funny. But you do know what "closet" meant and how playwrights like Middleton used it on stage, right?

GRAY: Um, of course. Danielle Bobker in her book *The Closet* provides the helpful definition of, quote: "Closet' was the generic term for any lockable room in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British architecture" (Bobker), endquote.

SCARLET: And then she calls back to feminist theory, discussing the power dynamics of letting someone in to a private space like a closet, and states that, quote: "most interpersonal experiences, including sexual ones, are private in certain respects and public in others" (Bobker), endquote.

GRAY: So in this scene in *The Changeling*, Alsemero is turning his private space into one of forced captivity. Instead of the possibility of any sexual acts between himself and Beatrice Joanna happening in that closet, he has shifted the power of that room in order to regain control.

SCARLET: Fantastic, thank you for that aside! So, Alsemero leaves her there to confront De Flores rather than forcing her to a second location. We see Beatrice and De Flores struggle. In the text her moans are ambiguous as to

whether they are of pleasure or not, but in this production she is definitely in pain. De Flores, after a struggle wherein they both fall into bed, stabs Beatrice. As they both confess their sins, they hold onto one another. De Flores stabs himself after confessing to Alonso's murder, and then falls atop Beatrice, and they both die in each other's embrace.

GRAY: This production made so many strong choices about both intimacy and violence! However the choices made don't seem to challenge the patriarchy that Beatrice is confined in. Instead this production upholds the patriarchy through the use of direct violence against women. It also shows Beatrice-Joanna falling in love with DeFlores, which fully takes away the agency of her attempt to gain a happy ending with Alsemero. It was really entertaining to watch, and will be fascinating to compare to our next production: The BBC 1993!

SCARLET: This production stars Elizabeth McGovern as Beatrice-Joanna, Hugh Grant as Alsemero, and Bob Hoskins as De Flores. It cuts the B plot entirely, focusing instead on the main characters in one seamless plot.

GRAY: Alonso's murder happens in another very dark room, where Deflores pulls out a switchblade and delivers three quick stabs to Alonso's back ribs. He then carries Alonso's body away from the small window and down a long hallway and places it on a raised ledge. He begins sawing off Alonso's finger in frame, and then a quick camera angle change occurs before De Flores promptly pushes the body off of the large window ledge it has been resting on and the audience hears a splash. We do not see the finger prop very clearly before De Flores wraps it in a handkerchief and the scene ends.

SCARLET: A slightly better look at the severed finger prop comes in the following scene where De Flores shows it off before demanding Beatrice's virginity as his payment. This scene has minimal physical contact until the very end, where Beatrice's fear compels her to kneel before De Flores. He joins her on the floor for a very passionate kiss and the scene fades to black before alternating between clips of people trying to find Alonso and his murderer and what is implied intercourse between Beatrice-Joanna and de Flores.

GRAY: For the bed trick, there's a quiet snippet of a scene where the audience sees Alsemero pulling his bed curtains closed before Diaphanta enters, blows out the candles lighting the room, and then disappears into the curtains. We hear no sound as we pan to Beatrice-Joanna just outside the chamber, waiting for Diaphanta's return. Beatrice does seem to begin loving De Flores in this production, but her whole performance indicates that she is losing her mental stability quickly and her love for De Flores is born out of pure desperation. Diaphanta's death happens off-screen with an audible gunshot, and De Flores re-enters carrying a piece of her clothing to demonstrate her demise.

SCARLET: Alsemero's accusation of Beatrice is far less violent in this production, with the only moment of contact being him forcing her into his closet (this time a more literal closet, a door in his bedroom). Once De Flores has been forced into the closet with her, their sounds walk the line very delicately between intimate and violent, alluding to the fact that they could be copulating or beginning their own deaths. They both emerge holding their stomachs with hands covered in blood, which Beatrice later touches De Flores' face with, leaving bloody streaks. De

Flores ends his life with a very sharp, intense wound, using the same knife he killed Alonso with. Beatrice Joanna, interestingly, doesn't receive any more wounds live on screen and instead seems to die from the wound she received in the closet, holding bloody hands with De Flores.

GRAY: This production seemed to follow the original text very closely, meaning that it didn't make any particularly strong choices with Beatrice-Joanna and her relationship to the patriarchal world that she lives in.

SCARLET: I felt like McGovern's Beatrice had more agency than Mirren's did, but only slightly. It was interesting to get to compare these two older film adaptations of this play, especially with the third production we watched.

GRAY: For our final case study we watched Brave Spirits Theater's 2018 production of the changeling. Instead of Scarlet and I talking you through the highlights as we have for the last two plays, we thought we might bring in a true expert! Cue the interview!

SCARLET: Charlene, thank you so much for agreeing to meet with us. Could you please give a ten second summary of who you are for our listeners at home?

CHARLENE: Sure. I'm, uh. Hello, I'm Charlene Smith. I'm a director, actor and scholar. Uh, and for about ten years, uh, I ran Brave Spirits Theater, which was a feminist Shakespeare company in the Washington, DC area.

SCARLET: Charlene, if you could please discuss the concept for the production with us. We would love to hear about it and how your concept inspired your intimate choices throughout the production.

CHARLENE: Sure. I think basically to say, in short, the choices around intimacy were the concept. Like those two elements were inseparable. Um, how this production came about. I had long been familiar with this play, um, as an early modernist. I think I first read it in undergrad. Um, but what made me finally decide, um, that I need to direct it, I need to direct it now, is that I saw a production at a major theatre that I felt was, uh, incredibly irresponsible in its portrayal of the relationship between Beatrice and of De Flores. And it made me extremely angry because clearly, the viewpoint of the male director was that their physical relationship was consensual. Um, and it was just so infuriating to, uh, particularly as a woman to watch a piece of art in which I see a female character say over and over again how she loathes De Flores, that she's frightened of him. So, so my entire production and and the it's it's, um, the concept and every choice we made, every step along the way, every hiring decision, every staging choice, even down to, like, how we marketed was mean to repudiate rape culture and the way that this play is normally performed.

GRAY: Awesome. Thank you so much. We've both had a chance to watch your archival recording of your production of *The Changeling* from 2018. And as scholars and theater makers, it left us with so many interesting questions. When thinking about intimacy and violence within your production, we first wanted to ask you how you achieved the severed finger effect during Pirquo's murder?

CHARLENE: Okay, I'm gonna do my best to remember some of these details from now, what was it, seven years ago at Brave Spirits. Um, so, first of all, like I, we went in knowing that the script pretty much requires De Flores to show Beatrice-Joanna the finger as proof of the murder. Um, so we knew we had to have it. My assumption, um, would be that the finger probably came from Casey Kaleba. Fight choreographer. Fight director? Um, because he generally tended to have a supply of body parts that often showed up in Brave Spirits productions. Um, so that would be my best guess. I know it was on kind of the props list and part of the production talk from the beginning, and we had some early rehearsal reports where we talked about the things we wanted to do with the finger. Um, in act three, scene four, like what De Flores might do with it in order to kind of continue to terrify Beatrice. Joanna. Um, for the staging, I think it was it was just pretty simple. Um, music. Bernice is is the actor she played De Flores, and I think she just carried the finger in her pocket during the murder scene. Um, and then it was fairly easy the way we blocked it with, um, Alonzo, you know, having fallen to the floor and his wounds and kind of curled up around his hand, made a convenient way to hide the hand, to cut it off in not view of the audience. So it's pretty easy to do that switch. Um, and then the other, the other, like, little bit of staging around the finger is Alonzo shows up as a ghost. Um, and I wanted to call back to the finger. Uh, um, or perhaps that's in the stage direction. I'm not sure I'd have to relook at the script. So we we staged the haunting scene, very dark, where the only illumination, I think, was candles. Um, and so I think I just cut off a finger from a black knit glove, and we put it over the actor's hand. The finger that would have been missing so that when he shined a light on his hand, it just looked like that finger was an empty space. So pretty. Pretty simple but effective theater magic.

SCARLET: That is so interesting with the glove. Oh my goodness. Well thank you. Uh, next we were wondering what the decision process was like when choosing for the audience to hear Diaphanta and Alsemero offstage during the bed trick. What led you to choose to add that auditory element to the scene?

CHARLENE: Um, I stole it from someone else. I have to give credit where credit is due. So, um, Jordan Friend worked on this production as a sound designer, but he had also directed this play several years earlier when he was just out of undergrad. Um, he had a small theater company that he was running, and he used the basement of his parents house as a performance space. Um, so I happened to go see that production. That's kind of how I met Jordan. And we became collaborators, and, um. Because it was in a basement. It was a very small audience, very small space. You could hear all the offstage action. And that really stuck with me from that production. Um, and I thought it really brought home sort of a claustrophobic feeling. Uh, so it was very important to me to kind of replicate that, that tone and feeling for the audience, even in the slightly bigger space that we had.

GRAY: Absolutely. I definitely felt it raised the stakes quite a bit by having that off stage action really be a part of what was happening on stage. Um, uh, continuing our discussion of Alsemero, um, he got quite violent with Beatrice and your production, even going as far as pulling a dagger when questioning her virtue and being quite forceful in putting her in the closet. Um, what inspired you to incorporate this extra textual violence?

CHARLENE: Um, yeah. It was. I actually found it quite important to this production as a whole and kind of linked to everything else we were trying to do, which is sort of like performing this theatrical intervention around this play and how it is interpreted. Um, but also keep it rooted in the text. Um, because I saw these characteristics in

the things he says. Right. Um, so it's a couple things. One is in his text, he is quite verbally abusive to Beatrice. Joanna, like he calls her a whore. He calls her a bunch of other names. And, um, I think the play wants to kind of set him up as a romantic hero. And, you know, I wanted I wanted to trouble that question, um, and sort of go against some of those final messages of the play, which is that, like Beatrice, Joanna deserves what happens to her. Like she has no worth, she has to die. And also kind of wrapped up in that is the play assumes that Alsemero is the true victim right? That that all of this is injury to him ultimately. And so I wanted to make sure that he, even though he was the love interest, also turned out to be as much an active agent of patriarchy as De Flores or Beatrice-Joanna's father. Um, I thought that was really important because he treats her very badly also, and has a whole bunch of assumptions wrapped up in virtue and chastity and and that sort of thing. Um, and I was really pleased. Had a great actor, uh, Ben Peter who was willing to go there and he wasn't afraid to make Alsemero unlikable. And I do remember that I had say that she thought Alsemero was the true villain of the play. And so I felt I felt pretty proud of that success.

SCARLET: Thank you. Yes. You've had all the buzzwords that we've already discussed earlier in our episode with patriarchy and chastity and purity. So thank you so much. Um, for the last textual moment, we wanted to ask you about. We were hoping to discuss De Flores and Beatrice, Joanna's closet scene and their deaths afterwards. Can you discuss your process of deciding on their offstage sounds while within the closet, as well as Allison Marrow assisting Beatrice with her taking her own life at the end of the play?

CHARLENE: Uh, yeah. So both this off stage moment and the earlier one you reference were really staged, um, by our intimacy choreographer, Emily Suture, which I know we're going to talk a little bit about as well. Um, I, I think I probably gave them sort of the basic idea of what the moment was about. But essentially Emily scored the moment guiding the actors in terms of sound and breath. Um, it is quite. What the script describes, particularly in that final scene, is quite complex. There is this overlap right between passion and death that, um. You can't, like, completely separate. And I think it should be. It's not. Wholly clear to the audience at all Um, in terms of Beatrice-Joanna's death, her suicide. Um, there were really two main, um, considerations in staging it that were very important to me. One is that I wanted her to die away from De Flores. It is very common in productions of this play to have them die in each other's arms. Uh, in a way to suggest that they are kind of meant to be there, like, because. A lot of productions kind of see them both have like twisted, um, immoral figures that, like, deserve each other in death, um, which I found very troubling. And so it's very important to me that they not die together and that they be they're just happened to separate as possible. So not only were they separated kind of, um. Horizontally, like where they were on stage, but also vertically, because we had that raised platform. And I think that's where the De Flores stuff happened. And then the second part was I really wanted to, uh, suggest Alsemero's culpability in her death. Um, right. Because. This story could have gone a different way if he had reacted to things differently, you know? And so, Um. And it was kind of like letting letting Beatrice-Joanna die on their own terms as much as possible. Um, rather than it being a choice to De Flores makes letting it be a choice that she makes and and her giving Alsemero the knife. Or like, holding his hand as she runs on to the knife. Um, was about her kind of taking control that moment and suggesting his culpability, because then he ends up with blood on his hands. And the way the end of the play is written, it ends with these men sort of bonding which I am not okay with. So as they sort of

have this textual bonding moment and they all shake hands, her blood passed from hand to hand, um, so that they all are marked with the violence that has occurred.

GRAY: The use of the physical marking throughout the production was just so, so, like, astonishing and impactful. It was very, very effective throughout the watching of it. Um, yeah. Thank you. Um, and thank you so much for discussing all of your directorial choices with us. It's been so, so special getting to have, like, an inside look at what the process was like. Um, just taking a step back and thinking about a production. Um, you've mentioned your intimacy coordinator already. Um, at what point in the rehearsal process did she really become, um, a part of the working through the production and whatnot?

CHARLENE: from the beginning. Um, I sort of, I ended up writing an article on how round about staging violence, um, responsibly coming out of this production. And one of the things I say is we sort of it's, it's not just enough to have an intimacy choreographer come in on the day and, like, block a few moves. It staged gendered violence like this and, and sort of place violence and intimacy hand in hand. So Emily was part of the production from the beginning. Um, they actually started by, um, teaching a workshop. We had a workshop rehearsal that was just about introducing the language of intimacy, work and consent, um, to give the actors the tools necessary, um, to say ves or no to things as they needed to. Um, and so Emily's presence was not just about blocking, but also about, uh, assisting us and how we talked about these very difficult moments. Um, and also to signal how important this was to this production and that, um, it mattered that this violence was handled responsibly and that everyone in the room that also, of course, is the intimacy in the show isn't just about act three, scene four, um, which is, you know, the major assault, but also, you know, one of the things Emily and I talked about a lot was like, what the narrative of intimacy throughout the entire play was, um, I actually made a chart that I, that I shared with them about, um, all of the kissing that happens in the play textually and marking them about whether they were non-consensual kisses or consensual kisses. And then Emily kind of used this list to guide the staging she developed around all these moments, kind of creating physical echoes to highlight what kind of touch it was. Um, so that, that was hugely important.

SCARLET: Thank you. As an intimacy choreographer myself, it is so exciting to hear about the process of this production. Thank you again, Charlene, for joining us and discussing your work on this production. If the listeners at home want to learn more about you or keep up with your current projects, where can they find you?

CHARLENE: Uh, well, I do have a website. www.Charlenevsmith.com Um, so that's where, where you can read more. And then, um, the other big project recently is, um, Brave Spirits Theatre's final project was, um, an audio podcast of Shakespeare's eight history plays. So those just dropped, uh, starting, like last month. In the month before. So Shakespeare's Histories in audio is available for listening on YouTube, Spotify and many other, you know, podcast app, so I hope people will check that out.

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SCARLET: We want to thank Charlene again for meeting with us and discussing her production's choices live! It helped us round out our exploration of the intimacy and violence within this play in such a special way.

GRAY: It was so cool to hear so much of our interpretation of *The Changeling* as a medium for highlighting the patriarchy's effects on early modern women echoed in Charlene's production!

SCARLET: So, what have we learned today?

GRAY: We learned that, within the play, Beatrice has to take drastic measures to gain even a semblance of control over her own life. This desperation results in the forceful loss of her virginity, the death of one of the only other women in the play, and eventually her own demise as well.

SCARLET: We learned that feminist theory is unbelievably applicable to this play, with the early modern focus on chastity and marriage being present on every page. The patriarchal structure that Beatrice is trapped in works against her in every way possible, and this is directly reflected in the historical records we have of early modern life.

GRAY: Then we took a deep dive into production history! In each performance we watched there were strong choices made about what violence and intimacy meant in their world. All three productions had extratextual violence, but only one of them was for the express purpose of highlighting how patriarchal oppression reinforces violence towards women.

SCARLET: And each production contained extratextual intimacy, whether it was intended to demonstrate De Flores' control over Beatrice Joanna or the ways in which she loses possession of her own body throughout the whole play.

GRAY: We hope you enjoyed exploring *The Changeling* with us today, and if you can't get enough of this crazy play there's a whole other episode you can listen to right now!