

ARTICLE

Christine vs. The Machine

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SUMMARY

This paper describes the purpose and process for creating *Je Christine*, a touring solo performance of selected works by Christine de Pizan which premiered in 2017. Conditions in the TV and film industry prior to the escalation in 2016 of the #MeToo Movement prompted my decision to abandon a successful on-screen career. In order to rebuild my career in a way that would afford me more control over my working conditions and the content of my projects, I undertook the creation of a one-woman stage show centered on a historical figure. I will explain my reasons for choosing Christine de Pizan as the subject of the show and describe how that choice created obstacles and opportunities during development of the project. I conclude by exploring the changes effected in my life and in my experience as a professional performer as a result of working closely with Christine's works.

KEYWORDS: Christine de Pizan, gender, #MeToo, solo performance, one-woman show, medieval author, paleography, Middle French, scholarly credibility, Marc Mauillon

Life as an Actor Before #MeToo

Christine de Pizan pulled my acting career out of the trash. It was I, in fact, who had tossed it away.

At the start of 2015, to be honest, my career hadn't exactly been flagging. Film and TV roles were plentiful enough, residual payments appeared regularly in the mailbox, and my talent agents seemed pleased with their commissions. As any professional actress "of an age" can tell you (especially if she isn't a household name), making a decent living solely from one's acting income deserves at least a modest victory dance. By all rights, this actress should have been doing the cha-cha slide. Despite years of highs and lows in the industry—actors' strikes, writers' strikes, the recession, and so forth—I was right where I'd hoped to be at this point in my life. And, I was miserable.

People become actors for all sorts of reasons, often the wrong ones; but, eventually, after a sufficient number of years in the industry, they sometimes choose to stay in the business for healthier reasons. Those dreams of Academy Awards, giant bankrolls, A-list pals, and closets full of designer evening clothes generally give way to a love of the craft, pure and simple. My greatest goal at this point in life was to do good work and enjoy mutual respect among my peers—oh, and to keep on earning a living, naturally. Throughout my thirty-some-odd years as an actress, I'd had the good fortune to work with tremendous artists on wonderful productions. And, so, in 2015, with a schedule of exciting jobs lined up, I expected terrific experiences in the year ahead. I was, as we

say, riding high for a very bad fall.

As 2015 progressed, too many nights found me slumping home after a long day's shoot feeling demoralized, disrespected, used. If the offending party wasn't a producer famed for chiseling actors out of their pay and their dignity, it was a power-hungry future "star" of the #MeToo Movement given to bullying fellow performers. Often the on-set caste system created by actors themselves left many cast members frozen out and wondering if they were even part of the same show. In all fairness, this isn't always the case. For every neurotic, mean-spirited diva, there's a Julianne Moore or a Nicholas Pinnock or a Kevin Hart genuinely and warmly greeting each actor on set and treating every colleague as an equal. There's a Steven Soderbergh working harder than anyone, inspiring all hands on the project to work equally hard because they're part of a creative team, and everyone's contribution matters.

However, 2015 was a banner year for creepy collaborators. Of several unpleasant work experiences, one proved to be the absolute nadir. On this particular gig, I watched the star repeatedly undermine the performances of other cast members in order to make himself the center of attention in the show. His rude treatment of co-workers made every moment on set a miserable grind. On a very late autumn night, as I glumly rode the production van back to the hotel, I determined that I couldn't set foot on another TV or film set. For over thirty years I'd worked toward the kind of success I was enjoying in the New York market—and now, if it meant being a cog in a machine that simply cranked out show after show with no regard for the players but rewarded the bad behavior of certain stars and producers, I didn't want to be an actor anymore. I would simply walk away.

Making Choices

The holidays approached, offering me time and space to think seriously about which alternate career path to choose. The obvious candidates were jobs I'd done prior to becoming a professional actor or as a fun sideline: costume designer, teacher, writer, photographer, acting coach. Each choice held some attraction but also certain drawbacks, and ultimately, I was left undecided and dispirited. The holidays were drifting by and soon I'd have to tell my agent *something*. A slight panic set in. On New Year's Eve, defeated and self-absorbed, I took serious stock of my situation.

New beginnings sometimes bring out our fearful inner child. My internal toddler grouched "I don't wanna! I don't wanna!" Suddenly, it became clear that I was on the brink of giving away something I still valued tremendously: my training, skill, and *joy* in being an actor. Was I doing that thing we girls are sometimes guilty of, handing over the ball we brought to the playground, caving in under the slightest pressure from a few boys claiming a right to our stuff? Maybe the best thing would be—metaphorically—to create my own private playground and shoot a few hoops myself, at least for a while. A number of acquaintances had written their own solo shows; the idea of creating a one-woman presentation, of being my own boss, responsible for my own project, and out from under the giant thumb of The Industry brightened my outlook. A historical character would be a good choice, because pre-existing interest in the subject—and its accompanying online searchability—could help build an audience. Which lucky historical figure would land the job, I wondered. A few years earlier, someone had suggested I develop a one-woman show about Susan Sontag, but after months of research, the idea of wearing Susan's shoes for an extended period

didn't appeal; it just sounded painful. Sontag was great and all, but we don't exactly mesh.

So, who would I want to "be" for the next five years or so—or even longer, as the case might be if the show were to prove successful? I thought back to the first historically-based solo show I had ever seen: *Mark Twain Tonight!* starring Hal Holbrook. My dad and I watched the 1967 broadcast on our chunky Zenith. Holbrook had created the stage show in the 1950s, and, in 2015, he was still performing it. Now, I'm no Hal Holbrook, but his sixty-year run as Samuel Langhorne Clemens gave me pause and a good reason to exercise careful discretion in making my choice.

It's funny how you can look back and see the seemingly minor events that influence your decisions down the road. In 1985, an in-law gave me a beautiful little appointment book, *The Medieval Woman: An Illuminated Book of Days*. Sandwiched between illuminations of workaday wheat-threshers, cabbage-pickers, and cow-milkers was the arresting image of a serenely self-possessed noblewoman in tall double-masted headdress, seated at her writing desk, her little dog in belled collar at her feet. The caption read: "*CHRISTINE DE PIZAN, WRITING.*"¹

Writing? Was this a secular authoress, in the Middle Ages? It seemed unlikely, but the image made a lasting impression, and I kept the attractive book as a log for friends' birthdays.

About once a decade thereafter, the name would crop up again. One night, while researching Sir Lancelot on my orange iMac for a curriculum-based play at Columbia Grammar School, I saw Christine's name scroll by. Something about instigating a scholarly debate among powerful clerics over a purportedly dirty book titled *The Romance of the Rose*. "You go girl!" I thought. Ten years later, in an engrossing tome by Barbara Tuchman, here she was again, penning a paean to her contemporary, Joan of Arc (219). This lady got around.

Back to New Year's Eve, 2015. Without knowing it at the time, I was doing a very Christine thing by choosing to bring a great woman of history to light, while bringing *myself* back to life. Instead of caving in and giving up my beloved career—my metaphorical playground ball—I would create something of my own, something that couldn't be co-opted or short-circuited by anyone else, a solo piece about Christine de Pizan, written, designed, performed, and promoted by me. My inner child was delighted to think of herself and Christine as the human embodiments of a favorite storybook character: the Little Red Hen. "I'll do it *myself!*"

Growing Pains: Researching, Translating, Constructing

"What a shame, though," I thought, "I'll have to put words into Christine's mouth because I'm sure not much of her work has survived after 600 years." Now, if you're a Christine scholar, you're rolling your eyes at this moment. A mere scratching of the surface reveals dozens of works by Christine, many written in her own hand, or at least under her supervision. In fact, there's plenty of autobiographical material as well, so I needn't have worried.

Having grown up in a small town outside of Montreal, I can read French quite well. However, I'd received no training in Middle French; so, of course it would be difficult for me to put together an English-language script from Christine's original works. The best approach was to read English translations of her books containing autobiographical passages and to cobble those passages into a narrative. I would then go back to the corresponding Middle French material and

re-translate the chosen portions in order to call the translations my own and avoid paying prohibitive royalties to other translators each time I performed the work. It only took a few weeks to select material for the script, and by placing Christine's works chronologically, I could see a compelling narrative take shape. Christine went from young widow, who supported her family by selling poems to the nobility, to full-fledged author, advisor to the royalty, and voice for her people. The autobiographical material she tucked into almost every book she wrote describes her personal journey during a time of political upheaval and war. This creates its own compelling narrative. It would take over a dozen performances, though, before I could suss out the true arc of the story. I tried following one textual lead and then another in searching for Christine's "*To be or not to be...*" Rather than impose my own idea of what that should be, I committed myself to giving time to the process and learning the answer from Christine herself. Much like Michelangelo trusting that the sculpture already exists within the marble block and simply releasing it with his chisel, I patiently waited for the dramatic arc of Christine's story to emerge.

Next came the hardest part: translation. Modern French editions of her books were mostly translations into modern French. I needed to go to the original material: hand-written manuscripts. Now, if I had actually known the word for the study of ancient manuscripts, "paleography," I'd have googled it. Ignorant as I was of the wealth of instruction available at my fingertips, I set out to teach myself how to read medieval French manuscripts. My practice material was a lousy choice, an early religious text containing mind-numbing rows of almost identical minims. For a full five hours one night, I stared at this puzzle, waiting, *waiting* for some pattern to emerge, hoping to channel Russell Crowe in his role as mathematician John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind* (2002), as he traced shapes in the stars for Jennifer Connelly. Eventually, finally, patterns did emerge from those maddening rows upon rows of minims, the one- and two-letter words providing keys for the larger ones. When I graduated to the online version of Christine's *Book of the Queen*, I found that her text was, surprisingly, more accessible. The hand was crisp and clear, and soon I caught on to the significance of swoops, slashes, and curlicues. However, some of the words themselves were a mystery. What the heck was "to *happay*"? And, this word "*esperons*," ...it couldn't possibly mean "we hope" in this particular context. Finding usable dictionaries took time, and finding better dictionaries took more time.

With the script still in its awkward growing stages, it was time to get the word out and see if there would be any interest in the project. I designed a website and planned a short video "trailer" of scenes, from the as-yet non-existent stage show. But there was a troubling fly in the ointment. I had no idea what accent to use in the trailer. A TV studio had been reserved for the shoot, and with the taping day imminent, a choice had to be made. Professors and experts in medieval French language and literature suggested I either a) use a modern Parisian accent, or b) speak in standard American English. All agreed that not enough was known about Middle French to inform an accurate re-creation, so I just shouldn't try it. This was discouraging advice. I had hoped to perform a few verses in the original Middle French, but the rhymes just didn't work in modern French.

Old Nuns, Old Accents

I've mentioned that my childhood home was in a little town outside of Montreal. Because of the distance to school, my sister and I became weekly boarders at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Montreal, thriving under the tutelage of delightful French nuns. Some of these sisters seemed *ancient*, and several had really peculiar accents. My guess is that they originally hailed

from remote, secluded towns in the province of Quebec. Instead of pronouncing the letter “r” as a voiced uvular fricative as modern Parisians do, these sisters launched it as a trill off the tip of the tongue. Single vowels became dizzying diph- and triph- and tetraphthongs. I mimicked this dialect (out of their earshot, of course), because even as a child I thought it was fantastic. When Christine’s poetry refused to rhyme in modern French accents, I tried using the one I remembered from my octogenarian nuns. It worked.

The nuns’ quaint speech became the foundation of my “Christine” accent. But was it valid? By happy accident, while searching for appropriate music, I happened upon YouTube videos featuring songs and poems by Guillaume de Machaut and other medieval French composers, sung and spoken by modern French artists. In particular, the work of the exceptional Marc Mauillon assured me that I was on the right track. His robust and detailed Middle French dialect resembled the archaic Québécois accent and helped me refine my own accent further.²

From the conception of the project on New Year’s Eve to Christine’s first appearance as a fleshed-out character on video at the WPAA-TV studio in Connecticut, the span of time was, curiously, a neat nine months. Meanwhile, I’d reproduced Christine’s blue gown and snowy headdress. A couple of friends had offered to make the costume for me, but this was a treat I refused to relinquish. In another life, I’d been a costumer, a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada’s Design Program. Peering through the domed magnifying glass that came with my *Compact OED*, I pored over illuminations of Christine and studied the details of her clothing. Fabric and notions from musty shops in Manhattan’s shrinking Garment District were lovingly transformed into a costume of intense medieval hues fit for a stained-glass window in the Sainte-Chapelle.

The project now had a title: *Je Christine*. This choice received push-back from francophone acquaintances who absolutely hated it. It didn’t make sense, they said. It wasn’t proper French. “Shouldn’t it be something like ‘*Moi, Christine*’? And, why isn’t there a comma?” For my money, *Je Christine* is the best and only acceptable title for the work. The phrase is repeated twenty-eight times in Christine’s opus *The City of Ladies*, and it’s in the opening line for her *Ditié de Jehanne D’Arc*.³ This two-word phrase has enormous significance as her personal claim to authority and authorship.

Establishing Credibility

With the script titled and completed, all the pieces in place, and the show rehearsed under the direction of my long-time collaborator Bill Burford, the ninety-minute play seemed ready for an audience. But, to my chagrined surprise, no audience appeared ready for *it*. E-mails to Medieval Studies departments flitted off into a silent void. Then, during online discussions with a university professor in the Midwest about a possible booking, a wayward e-mail between that professor and his associate cc’d me by mistake: “Yes, she sounds interesting, but is she *scholarly* enough to bring in?” (emphasis added). Obviously, they thought not, because the conversation dead-ended there.

Rather than feel mortified, I felt grateful for the insight, because it undoubtedly held a clue as to why the show hadn’t caught on yet. I first had to unpack the meaning of the word “scholarly.” I knew what it meant, but what exactly did *they* mean by “scholarly”? Was it a knowledge of one’s subject, a position at a powerful institution, membership in erudite academic circles, a string of

letters after one's name? I was a design school graduate and an actor, not a Ph.D. Researching and building the show had taught me a lot, but I wasn't the ultimate authority on Christine de Pizan, let alone on the late Middle Ages. What exactly did they need before they would consider booking the show, and how could I satisfy that requirement?

Norman Frisch—producer, dramaturge, and consultant for a number of NYC theatre companies—offered his advice on the matter: “Reach out to the best Christine de Pizan scholars you can find, and see if they'll give you an endorsement.” “How do I get an entrée?” “Trust me, scholars love to talk—just e-mail them.” I aimed high, firing off short missives to a chosen few of my favorite Christine translators and authors, asking for their reactions to the video trailer. Almost immediately, two of my biggest heroes responded. Tracy Adams (author of *Christine de Pizan and the Fight for France*) and Earl Jeffrey Richards (translator of *The City of Ladies* and Christine's letters) graciously gave positive reviews. Jeff Richards praised, in particular, what he called my “impeccable” Middle French accent.⁴ A few weeks later, Julia Nephew and Ben Semple of the Christine de Pizan Society offered guidance for booking a performance at the 2019 Mostly Medieval Theatre Festival in Kalamazoo, MI. I was on my way.

Je Christine on the Road

A year after my New Year's Eve epiphany, and sporting these stamps of scholarly approval, *Je Christine* began touring the United States and Canada in early 2017. The show's two oversized rolling duffels meet requirements for free checked baggage on Southwest Airlines and actually hold the entire show: several disassembled pieces of oak furniture, the voluminous costume, a couple of painted wall hangings, and a goodly number of hand props consisting mostly of books. The trail of engagements has included Bard College, UT Austin, Southwestern University, the University of Kentucky, the Montauk Library, The Curtain Theatre in Austin, Riverside Church in Manhattan, the aforementioned Mostly Medieval Festival, and many other venues and events. Seminars and workshops are often added to the dates, as well as speaking engagements and interviews. Norman Frisch's sage advice successfully cracked the “*scholarly enough*” nut.

Although to adequately describe the experience of performing ninety minutes of Christine's works before a live audience would require the space of another paper or two, I *can* share with you what the experience is *not*. It's not magic. I do not “channel Christine,” as several have suggested, although that's a tremendous compliment. It's all hard work and discipline. What I do is strive to deliver her words clearly, simply, and as accurately as possible. Christine's writing, her down-to-earth, forthright manner of relating her experiences in words is the sorcery which conjures her presence.

Rather than being exhausted after the ninety-minute roller-coaster of ideas and emotions that is *Je Christine*, I always feel energized, ready for the post-show discussion. These “talk-backs” bring fresh insights and reactions from audience members. At a Florida retirement community for military personnel, a woman spoke up during the discussion, saying matter-of-factly, “Many of us here are widows. Christine's experience is what *we* have experienced.” At the University of Kentucky, a scholar in the back row burst into tears during Christine's description of studying in seclusion. Afterwards, she told me privately, “The love of study is a big part of my life and so terribly important to me, and her words reached right into my heart.” Many are moved by the depth

of Christine's love for her husband, despite the fact that hers was an arranged marriage. Others note the political parallels between Christine's era and ours. All are moved by Christine's courage, resourcefulness, and willingness to fight for the fair representation of women in literature.

Perhaps this project's greatest gift to me has been the continued conversation with Christine scholars whose translations and research have informed my work. Their suggestions and insights encourage ongoing refinements to the script and inspire me to hone the show into an ever-stronger representation of Christine's life and works. It was a suggestion from Jeff Richards that finally helped reveal the arc of the show. His request that I add an excerpt from Christine's *Hours of the Contemplation of the Passion of Our Lord* unexpectedly threw the entire script into higher relief (*Writings* 346–47). The piece was now no longer a ninety-minute recounting of her life, but a build-up to Christine's "to be or not to be" moment. She comes to realize through her prayer to the Holy Sepulchre that because her Savior died to redeem the souls of his flock, and because Jean, Christine's son, died in exile in service to the future King of France, she, Christine, must come out of hiding and do her part to lead her countrymen out of the dark as well. By writing and delivering the *Ditié* of Joan of Arc, which is her rallying cry to the French to throw off the shackles of English rule and embrace their rightful king, Christine risks her life for the spiritual and physical deliverance of the French people.

The most recent performance of *Je Christine* took place at Brigham Young University in March of 2020, on the brink of the pandemic lockdowns. The show was a central event of the symposium, "Women's Voices of the Middle Ages & Renaissance." Looking back, I recall the intellectual camaraderie at the symposium, the thrilling keynote address of Dr. Elissa Weaver, Professor Emerita at the University of Chicago, and the opportunity to perform *Je Christine* one last time before taking shelter in my New York apartment. These memories have given me something of beauty to hold onto during the months of isolation necessitated by Covid-19. The light of shared ideas and thought help lead us through a time of pandemic, climate change, violence, and political turmoil much as it did for Christine and her contemporaries.

Rebirth

And, as for my acting career: Sometime in 2016, I resumed work in the TV and film industry. A number of surprising and delightful roles have come my way, and I've enjoyed working with the companies that hired me. Perhaps it's just a coincidence, but since the conception and birth of *Je Christine*, my work experiences have been nothing but positive. Of course, this could be the result of policy changes in the industry brought about by the #MeToo Movement. Or it might be the increased union monitoring of producers' treatment of performers. More than likely, though, the real change is in me. I've clearly undergone a transformation, much as Christine did after enduring her troubles as a young widow, which she describes in her books *The Vision of Christine* and *The Mutation of Fortune*. Like Christine, I sense a sea-change in my willingness to protect myself and my artistic property. Performing Christine de Pizan's works in *Je Christine* has given me a wealth of inspiration. In the *Treasury of the City of Ladies*, which is quoted in the show, Christine urges women to protect their own interests by hiring the wisest counsel and standing up for themselves. As she tells her fellow widows, in particular:

[They] must take on the heart of a man. [They] must be constant, strong and wise in judging and pursuing [their] advantage, not crouching, in tears, like some simple woman or like a

poor dog who retreats into the corner while all the other dogs jump on him. (199–200)

Can one recite these wise words, repeatedly and over a span of what has now been almost four years, without internalizing them and developing a stronger spine for defending and protecting one's interests? I think not.

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Notes

¹ Illumination of Christine de Pizan at her desk from *The Book of the Queen, The Collected Works of Christine de Pizan*. MS. Harley 4431, f. 4. British Library, London.

² There are many recordings and videos of Marc Mauillon performing in a Middle French dialect. This is the one that brought him to my attention: Pierre Hamon, “Complainte—Remede de Fortune—Machaut” (1 Nov 2010). (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZZlktNWtHM>)

³ “The first time Christine uses the phrase ‘je Christine’ (which everybody knows from the *Ditié*) is in the title of her *Enseignemens moraux* in the Duke’s manuscript from 1405 where she writes in her own hand: *Les enseignemens que je Christine donne a Jehan de Castel mon filz*. She uses ‘Je, Christine’ twenty-eight times in the *Cité des Dames*, twice in *Trois Vertus*, and then famous lines opening the *Ditié*: ‘Je, Christine, qui ay plouré / Unze ans en abbaye close.’ She says ‘moy, Christine’ once in *Charles V*, and five times in the *Cité des Dames*. The reason that this overlooked fact is so important is that it is at this moment where Christine publicly embraces her identity in the first person singular, and specifically in a didactic context otherwise forbidden to women.” (Private communication from Jeff Richards, 4 Jan. 2017, emphasis in the original)

⁴ See reviews at www.jechristine.com.