Feminist views on the English stage

Women playwrights, 1990–2000

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1 A feminist view on the 1990s

A dominant view of the British stage as it entered the final decade of the twentieth century was that it was in a critical state; was on a downward spiral as it struggled to survive the draconian effects of the Thatcher years. In particular, paralleling the millennial moment of 100 years earlier, the 1990s, like the 1890s, were apparently suffering from a lack of 'new drama'.[1] The 'most telling indicator of diminishing theatrical vitality', writes Christopher Innes in conclusion to his epic study *Modern British Drama 1890–1990*, 'is the comparative absence of new playwrights'.[2] When Innes arrives at 1990, the final moment in a century of theatre that he traces back to Shaw in 1890, he presents a bleak picture of playwrights withdrawing from theatre (Harold Pinter), not developing (Howard Barker and Howard Brenton), retreating into commercialism (Peter Schaffer), or becoming part of an 'old guard' (David Hare, Tom Stoppard, Alan Ayckbourn).

However, in contrast to the downward trend in British drama as viewed through his list of male playwrights, Innes cites the emergence of women dramatists as a potentially energising force, given their political drive and desire to experiment. 'Present tense – feminist theatre' is how Innes titles his final chapter, set apart and signalling a new departure from the patterns and categories of playwriting through which he maps his century of drama.[3] Innes was not alone in noting the energies of feminist theatre. Playwright David Edgar signals 'the explosion of new women's theatre' in the 1980s, and theatre critic Benedict Nightingale, endorsing Edgar's view, cites women's drama as the 'most positive aspect' of the 1980s, an otherwise 'barren decade for new drama'.[4] From the vantage point of a new century it might be reasonable, therefore, to expect to be looking back on a decade when

women dramatists, capitalizing on their advancement in the 1980s, finally moved centre stage.

This is not, however, what happened. Although the British stage claimed its renaissance in the mid-1990s, it was not represented as feminist, but was, in a majority view, associated with a wave of writers, that, like the Osborne generation before them, were (mostly) angry young men.[5] Theatre history of the 1990s is, as Alex Sierz's, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* testifies, written as a 'shock-fest' of violent drama by mostly angry young men, joined by a few angry young women.[6]

There is a danger, however, that 'in-yer-face' theatre history may write out all playwriting that is not considered central to a drama of 'new laddism'.[7] Feminist theatre scholarship has demonstrated how women's contribution to drama, theatre and performance always has been susceptible to loss; has been frequently 'written out', culturally marginalised and 'lost' to view. In consequence, theatrical recovery has been a mainstay of feminist activity. Despite the close proximity of the period studied to the moment of writing, this project was originally conceived as an act of feminist recovery; of making those dramatic energies of women in the 1990s a matter of public record, rather than allowing them to disappear.

'Boys in trouble': a backlash 1990s

Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, published in Britain in 1992,[8] offers extensive documentation of the media-created myth of a 'post-feminist' 1980s; the promotion of anti-feminist views at the very moment that feminist women generally, like theatre women specifically, had made a few, albeit limited, advances. The backlash, Faludi argues, was galvanised by men realising what they stood to lose, and women lost out because they did not 'capitalise' on their 'historic advantage'.[9] However, on a similar note to Innes, although in a broader cultural, rather than a specifically theatrical context, Faludi concludes *Backlash* with the observation: 'there really is no good reason why the 1990s can't be their [women's] decade. Because the demographics and the opinion polls are on women's side. Because women's hour on the stage is long, long

overdue'.[10] Optimism for the 1990s as a women's decade, was, however, short-lived. As testimony to the 'war' against women, undeclared or otherwise, that Faludi and others claimed,[11] the battle between the sexes began to appear in print and performance. Neil Lyndon's *No More Sex War* (1992) and David Thomas's *Not Guilty* (1993) are key examples of men claiming victim status and blaming feminism for the oh-so-much-harder-lives men have compared to women.[12] On the London stage in 1993, David Mamet's highly controversial *Oleanna* staged the gender war in a dramatic two-hander in which a male professor, accused by a female student of political incorrectness, harassment and rape, turns angry and violent.[13]

Understanding the unabated hostility of men towards women informs Faludi's subsequent study, *Stiffed*, published at the close of the decade in 1999. The 'betrayal of modern man', the book's subtitle, signals Faludi's interest in ways in which men have been betrayed by capitalist and patriarchal systems effecting their displacement from their traditional roles in employment and family. One of Faludi's key findings is that in response to these 'betrayals', 'men prefer to see themselves as 'battered by feminism than shaped by the larger culture'.[14] As masculinity in crisis, the boys in trouble, comes to dominate the decade, the unwillingness to lay the blame anywhere other than at feminism's door, accounts for the anti- (sometimes virulently anti-) feminist feel to the decade. A culture of feminist blame, however, does not resolve, rather deepens masculinity in crisis, and as the playwriting examined in Chapter 3, 'Saying no to Daddy: child sexual abuse, the "big hysteria"' illustrates, places women and children at greater risk.

'Boys' on television, film and stage

Faludi's *Stiffed* primarily relates to American culture. America in the 1990s was a scene of 'men behaving badly', from celebrity boxers (Mike Tyson, convicted for the rape of Desiree Washington) to American presidents (Bill Clinton, impeached for his alleged affair with Monica Lewinsky). Britain in the 1990s was arguably not dissimilar. 'New lad' misogyny, media created by magazines such as *Loaded* (1994), displaced the earlier, 1980s image of the 'new man' and provided

testimony to a masculinist culture that derided women in attempts to bolster a vulnerable male ego. The television review, *Goodbye to the '90s*, broadcast on BBC2 at the close of 1999, for example, images Britain as a nation dominated by designer drugs and football. Significant in the documentary are the gender lines created through the choice and juxtaposition of clips. Popular entertainment, culture and sport, emerge as overwhelmingly male-dominated, as exemplified in programmes such as *Fantasy Football League*, which offers men the best of both worlds: football in a comedy format. When women occasionally take part, they are aiming to prove they can be as good as the boys (Miss Great Britain appeared on *Fantasy Football* drinking a pint of beer), or they are thoroughly degraded (as in Brigitte Nielson's drunken appearance on *Fantasy World Cup Live* in 1998). In brief, what the review makes clear is the way in which the 'new lad' culture that emerged in the 1990s was effective in silencing (degrading, even) women's representation.

British film in the 1990s also offers an at-a-glance view of an emergent masculinist culture.[15] Like theatre, British film had suffered a crisis of funding in the 1980s and was struggling to support new work. Significant among the films that helped to revive the fortunes of the cinema industry in the 1990s were those that variously represented masculinity in crisis. The adaptation of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1996) gave expression to a 1990s generation of Thatcher's children: disaffected young men who, in the absence of any purpose – political, social or otherwise – locate directionless lives in an urban world of designer drug-taking. The success of the film was in part dependent on a style of innovative film-making that aesthetically captured the mood of disaffection and its attendant sub-cultural, drug-taking lifestyle. Financially, however, the film was only modestly successful compared to the next major 'boys in trouble' movie: *The Full Monty* (1997).[16] *The Full Monty* locates masculine disaffection in a community of ex-steel workers from Sheffield. Displaced from marriages, families, homes and jobs, the men take up stripping: their only means of survival is in the objectified ornamental role, traditionally reserved for women. The internecine struggles of male communities – communities that were felt to be under threat in real life – were generally popular in the 1990s,

though varied in representation from the openly misogynist *Brassed Off* (1996) ('girl' tries to join the boys' brass band at a local colliery), to Jez Butterworth's Quentin Tarentino-influenced 1950s gangland *Mojo* (1997), or Kevin Elyot's circle of gay friends in *My Night with Reg* (1997).

Both *Mojo* and *My Night with Reg* were plays before they were movies, and both were staged in seasons at the Royal Court that remained heavily engaged with boys' drama throughout the decade. Mark Ravenhill's consumerist take on sexual relations, *Shopping and F***ing* (1996), with ex-Royal Court director Max Stafford-Clark and his new company Out of Joint, was greeted by many as theatre's answer to *Trainspotting*. Masculinity was represented with a harsh and violent edge in the plays of Antony Nielson, but given a more gentle (although arguably more forceful, persuasive) treatment in Jonathan Harvey's gay play, *Beautiful Thing* (1993, also given cinematic treatment). Women were 'peaches' in Nick Grosso's debut play (*Peaches*, 1994), absent in Patrick Marber's all-male gambling community in *Dealer's Choice* (1995) and 'offstage' (at the end of a telephone) in Simon Block's *Not a Game for the Boys* (1995). It is not that these plays group together in terms of style or register, but that, as David Edgar argues, they share an 'over-arching theme': 'these plays address masculinity and its discontents'.[17] So if 'masculinity and its discontents' culturally and theatrically moved centre stage in the 1990s, what happened to women and to feminism?

Feminist directions in the 1990s

To extend, for a moment, the at-a-glance view of British cinema in the 1990s to representations of women, it is much harder to find positive (progressive) imaging. 'Viewing' is hindered by the numerous costume dramas and the continued success of (heterosexual) romance narratives (*Four Weddings and a Funeral* 1994; *Notting Hill* 1999). Influenced by Hollywood 'killer women' films, such as *Thelma and Louise* and *Terminator II* (both 1991),[18] the 'bad girl' began to make an appearance. Tank Girl, a British comic strip creation of the late 1980s, for example, was turned into a movie in 1995. The collision of power, femininity and personal happiness was given a more political

treatment in *Elizabeth* (1999), although was arguably more forcefully imaged through the real life events surrounding the death of Princess Diana in 1997.

One particular image of young women, however, came to dominate Britain in the 1990s: the confident, aggressive, girls-together image promoted by the The Spice Girls (1996) and packaged in their 'Cool Britannia' styled *Spice World: The Movie* (1997). The band promoted 'girl power' as a 'new' feminism for the 1990s, and member Geri Halliwell cited Margaret Thatcher as 'the original Spice Girl'.[19] 'Girl power' was this contradictory mix of feminist and anti-feminist discourses that promoted an image of aggressive 'sisterhood' and feminine glamour through a creed of selfish individualism designed to 'get what you want out of life'. It was precisely the damaging consequences of this kind of 'right-wing' feminism on the lives of young women that so concerned Caryl Churchill in *Top Girls* (1982) revived some ten years later as a 'bookend to the Thatcher period' (see Chapter 2).[20] Later in the decade, playwrights like Rebecca Prichard and Judy Upton would dramatise the gap between social reality and the 'girl power' myth for communities of disadvantaged young women in the 1990s (see Chapter 4).

'Girl power' also signals a generational gap in feminism in the 1990s. The binarism of 'old' and 'new', or 'victim' and 'power' models of feminism crudely separated an older style of second-wave feminism from a third generation of feminism. Among American feminists, 'power' feminism is exemplified by Naomi Wolf's *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How it will Change the 21st Century* (1993) or Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (1993). *Fire with Fire* sees an older style of 'victim' feminism as a hindrance to women advancing their increased access to power in the wake of what Wolf argues as the 'genderquake' of the 1990s.[21] Roiphe takes a narrower focus and concentrates on the idea of 'victim feminism' in the context of rape, particularly date rape, a phenomenon of the 1990s in both America and Britain,[22] accusing feminism of promoting a culture of fear and excessive political correctness.

In British feminism, an example of 'new' styled feminism can be found in Natasha Walter's *The New Feminism*, where Walter accuses

second-wave feminists of taking 'feminism to a dead end'.[23] Briefly, her argument is that second-wave feminism paid too much attention to bodies; that the 'new feminism' is more political and less personal in approach. There are, however, very serious problems with Walter's account of feminism, not least of which is the idea that second-wave feminism was somehow not interested in the 'material basis of economic and social and political inequality'.[24] Moreover, despite claims to a materialist feminist base to her 'new feminism', Walter's feminism has most in common with an old style of bourgeois feminism, the least radical of the established feminisms that proposed modest changes in the interests of increasing power to a minority of a few (already privileged) women. This, as Imelda Whelehan observes, turns out to be a prevalent problem with strands of 'new feminism': 'the implication is that they have something original to say about feminism, but on closer inspection it is clear that the main thrust of their arguments are very old indeed – an improbable mixture of early second-wave positions, coupled with classic anti-feminist sentiments'.[25] In brief, if the 'new' style of feminism represented women waking up to what Faludi argued as their missed opportunity of the 1980s, it was, nevertheless, problematic on account of its failure to bridge the 'gap' between advantaged and disadvantaged communities of women.

Feminism in the 1990s was also experiencing a difference of views over the issue of identity politics. The editorial to the 1989 spring issue of *Feminist Review: The Past Before Us, Twenty Years of Feminism*, marks feminism as having reached the point of recognising differences and inequalities between women (of race, sexuality, class). 'The danger now lies', cautions the editorial, 'in the reification of differences rooted in experiential identities'.[26] For identity to reside wholly through the personal, the individual, runs the risk of inherent essentialism and, in terms of a feminist movement, fragmentation and divisiveness between groups of women (as happened in the 1980s).

The 1990s challenge to identity politics came from feminist philosophy associated principally with Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick. In the wake of Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1991) especially, ideas of gender and performativity came into wide critical and theoretical circulation. *Gender Trouble* and its sequel *Bodies that Matter* (1993)

proposed that there is no subject to decide on its gender; no subject who gets to choose. Rather, gender is a matter of reiteration: the regulated, forcible citation of gender 'norms' established and maintained by dominant cultural and social systems that invest heavily, if not exclusively, in the heteronormative.

Closer to home, in the field of performance studies, Peggy Phelan also proposed a critique of identity politics and the visible in her influential *Unmarked* (1993), arguing that 'there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal', and 'real power in remaining unmarked'.[27] On the other hand, leading international feminist theatre scholars, Sue-Ellen Case and Janelle Reinelt among them, have challenged the way that critical projects like Phelan's or Butler's involve the possible evacuation of a political agenda. As Case argues in *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (1996), while such projects claim a 'less essentialist base', they risk abandoning the 'materialist discourses that signalled to activist, grassroots coalitions'.[28] Chapter 6 looks at aspects of this debate through two different responses to identity politics: Bryony Lavery's staging of lesbian love stories and Phyllis Nagy's dramatisation of gender trouble and identity displacement.

In desiring beyond a reductive model of 1980s identity politics, feminism in the 1990s also began to think transnationally. The influence of cultural and literary theorists such as Gayatri Spivak encouraged engagement with the colonising binary of first and third world feminisms. An emergent transnational feminism in the 1990s looked to ways of acknowledging the global and the local, of making cross-border connections, resistant to the colonial 'othering' of gender, race and nation. Chapter 7 looks at crossing cultural and theatrical borders in black and Asian writing as feminism connects to a multicultural 'scene'. Transnational thinking also informs Chapter 8: an examination of Timberlake Wertenbaker's cross-border politics that links contemporary feminism to issues of European citizenship as a major issue for the twenty-first century.

There is another feminist view circulating throughout this study: my own. As a title, 'Feminist Views on the English Stage' is designed to signal feminism as double, meaning both a feminist approach

to the playwrights and playwriting considered in this volume, and the idea that some (though not necessarily all) of the writers and plays directly engage with feminism. Again, it is possible to see a generational gap in attitudes towards feminism, from, for example, Caryl Churchill's enduring and evolving commitment to socialist-feminism, to Sarah Kane's 'I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don't believe there's such a thing'.[29] My own view is one that carries with it a history of teaching and researching feminist plays and performances over the past twenty years or more, a feminist history that I hope is useful to the study in being able to make sense of the 'present' within the context of an immediate, contemporary, past. Unlike Walter, I would not argue for a 'new' feminism, but for a continuum: an understanding of feminism as a political field that responds intrinsically and extrinsically to social and cultural change, but always with a view to understanding and, if not radically transforming, then at the very least ameliorating the social and cultural conditions under which a majority, and not a privileged minority, of women, variously and heterogeneously, live their lives.

Feminist structures of feeling

The explosion of explicitly feminist theatre-making in the 1970s was an artistic response to the lived experience of social and cultural exclusion. That, as Innes explained, women dramatists departed from the categories of theatre that had been in place for a century, reflects their need for different 'patterns', styles and aesthetics to give expression to experiences of social and cultural marginalisation. To mark a break, a rupture, with cultural tradition is indicative, as cultural materialist critic Raymond Williams explains, of a response to dominant culture's 'selective tradition', in this instance, one that had effectively written women out/off.[30] Quite what form feminist drama took, what radical break it made with the theatrical 'past', was dependent upon what kind of feminism coloured the stage picture,[31] but, overall, the break was indicative of what Williams describes as a 'a radical kind of *contemporary* change' giving rise to 'new structures of feeling'.[32]

When Williams explains the break with the past as reflecting '*contemporary* change' his use of the word '*contemporary*' is

significant. What was contemporary for the 1970s is no longer contemporary in the 1990s, and what needs to be acknowledged is that structures of *feminist* feeling are a matter of evolution; a response to differently lived lives and experiences of women in the 1990s that were not those of an earlier generation of 1970s feminist women.[33] Williams explains: 'One [feminist] generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but *the new generation will have its own structure of feeling*'.[34]

In presenting a selection of women's playwriting from the 1990s, I have aimed to mix playwriting generations and feminism to illustrate a 1970s feminist legacy circulating among different feminist structures of feeling that reflect a world that seems a whole lot darker and more violent. Women are still represented as victims of male violence and abuse, as in the theatre of Sarah Daniels and other abuse plays examined in Chapter 3, but women are also perpetrators of violence. In Phyllis Nagy's *Butterfly Kiss* a daughter kills her mother. In Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* a young woman has killed her baby and in Daniels's *Esme and Shaz* a young girl has killed her half-sister. Young women seeking 'girl power' in reality are shown to live damaged (street) lives, as in the girl gang communities of Judy Upton and Rebecca Prichard, or in the women who smuggle drugs for a living in Winsome Pinnock's *Mules.* Situating the 1990s canon of Sarah Kane at a mid-point in the study was also designed to ask what it means for a feminist landscape to be ruptured by a playwright whose rejection of the idea of a woman writer, as Graham Saunders argues, 'seem[ed] to both simultaneously reject issues of gender and sexuality operating in the work itself and abruptly cut Kane off from any "tradition" or pattern for British women writing in the medium of theatre since the 1950s'.[35] Yet as much as I was drawn, on the one hand, to the insights that such discontinuities and ruptures offered, I was, on the other, excited by feminist continuities and connections. Most significant in this respect was an emergent urgency and concern for the child (literally and metaphorically) at risk in a world where feminist agency is lost to the individualist, materialist principles of late twentieth-century capitalism – a world which, as the title of Caryl Churchill's

first play of the twenty-first century suggests, is not so very 'far away'.

While so many of the masculinity-in-crisis plays are inward-looking, nihilistic and lacking in political direction, much of the theatre I consider here engages with the dangers of a contemporary world, its inequalities and injustices, in a way that strives to be forward-looking, political and hopeful. Even in the darkest of pictures – such as Kane's *Blasted* or Lavery's *Frozen* – there is a glimmer of hope. As Kane argued, 'sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality. If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future'.[36]

Theatre contexts

I am aware that my own study is also, out of necessity, 'selective'. In seeking to balance a breadth of feminist argument with detailed play analysis, I could not be inclusive of all writers and all plays.[37] Nor, in view of these constraints, was it possible to widen my scope from the English to the British stage (a limitation that I hope future feminist theatre research will address).[38]

My view of the English stage is determined or shaped by a focus on those venues and companies dedicated to new writing. Key among them are the London based venues: the Royal Court, the Bush, the Hampstead and the Red Room. What these venues had in common in the 1990s were directors prepared to give their support to new writing: Stafford-Clark at the Court until 1993, succeeded by Stephen Daldry and Ian Rickson;[39] Dominic Dromgoole at the Bush until 1996, followed by Mike Bradwell; Jenny Topper, artistic director throughout the decade at the Hampstead; and Lisa Goldman at the Red Room, from its inauguration in 1995. Also important is the Soho Theatre Company, dating back to 1972 which, at the end of the 1990s, after a chequered history, secured a permanent home, courtesy of Lottery funding.[40] The National Studio (surviving the threat of closure in 1997 when the Old Vic and its annexe, where the Studio is housed, went up for sale) operates as an important resource for writers, offering them the opportunity to workshop and to develop scripts. Touring company Paines Plough commissioned new work in the early 1990s under

the direction of Anna Furse (1990–4). Latterly the company was reinvigorated under Vicky Featherstone (director of Kane's *Crave*, 1998). Although woefully underfunded, Max Stafford-Clark's Out of Joint found a way of making new writing 'pay' by pairing a revival of a classic or popular play with a piece of new writing, and finding co-producers or partners for productions.[41] As co-producers and hosting venues, regional theatres have been vital to sustaining new drama. Out of Joint's production of Wertenbaker's *The Break of Day*, for example, was co-produced with Leicester Haymarket and paired with Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, while the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, under Bill Alexander's direction, has staged a variety of new writing in its studio venue (including, for example, plays by Bryony Lavery and Judy Upton), at the same time as building and sustaining a relationship with Asian women-led company, Tamasha.

While this describes the new writing scene generally it does not, or rather cannot, account for the complex web of relationships between writers and the people who manage, direct and produce their work, and the contexts of these relations – personal, social, cultural, material and theatrical – in any one given moment, that affect whether or not a play gets put on. Clearly, finding and sustaining relations between writers and their directors, practitioners and agents is vital to having plays performed. While it is possible to cite several examples of where women writers have benefited from specific relations – Caryl Churchill and Timberlake Wertenbaker with director Max Stafford-Clark, Judy Upton with director Lisa Goldman, Sarah Daniels with director Jules Wright, or Sarah Kane and Phyllis Nagy with agent Mel Kenyon – it is also the case that women playwrights generally perceive themselves as relatively disadvantaged when compared to male writers. This emerges as a constant complaint in the interviews in *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*: 'men get opportunities. They get staged. They get coverage' (Phyllis Nagy, *Rage*, p.28); 'statistically more women go to the theatre than men and yet women seem to have so little power over what they see and over what is chosen on their behalf' (Pam Gems, *Rage*, p.97), or 'all writers are dependent on the vagaries of whoever runs theatres, except it's often the vagaries of men because men still really do run theatres' (April

de Angelis, *Rage*, p.59). Complaints of inequality are borne out by statistics, such as those produced by the Women's Playhouse Trust, a producing company set up in 1981 to create opportunities for women in British theatre and to give support to new writing by women.[42] Such figures show that women still have less share of the theatrical cake, and that complaints about the high profile given to the boys' plays in the 1990s are legitimate. Of writer Judith Johnson, Bush director Dominic Dromgoole comments, for example, 'an assured, still and sane voice, Judith Johnson was swamped by the explosion of boys' plays that appeared at the same time as her'.[43] Even established playwrights like Timberlake Wertenbaker felt squeezed out by the demand for a 'different kind of play; male violence, homoerotica' (*Rage*, p.137). In brief, doing battle with the vogue for boys' plays in the 1990s has made it all the harder for women on the new writing circuit, making successful relations with managements, directors and agents, all the more critical.

Although new writing generally has the support of companies and venues as cited, women's playwriting also finds a small outlet in the few surviving companies, mostly formed in the more liberal climate of the 1970s, who are dedicated to producing theatre committed to a programme of social change, sexual politics or feminism (or possible combinations of these). The few companies of this kind that have kept going are nothing compared to the number of groups that folded as a result of losing funding. Casualties of funding cuts at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s include, for example, the lesbian theatre company, Siren, and Monstrous Regiment, which had regularly commissioned plays by British and European women writers.[44] Gay Sweatshop, financially vulnerable at the start of the decade, found a brief new lease of life as a touring company of queer theatre and performance, but ceased in 1996 after further funding cuts. A company that has endured is Clean Break, formed in 1979 as a group of predominantly female ex-offenders, playing to prisons, touring nationally, and commissioning some of the women writers who appear in this volume (Sarah Daniels, Winsome Pinnock, Rebecca Prichard and Anna Reynolds). Exceptionally, in 1998 Clean Break secured a building base in Kentish Town, North London. Two long-standing companies

currently provide opportunities for women to devise: Scarlet Theatre (formerly Scarlet Harlets) and Foursight Theatre. Only one of the 1970s women's new playwriting companies remains: The Sphinx Theatre Company, formerly The Women's Theatre Group.[45]

The Sphinx Theatre Company: (re)-presenting women writers

The Women's Theatre Group dates from 1973 and has been instrumental in creating opportunities for women writers to develop their craft. While an early phase of the company's work was committed to collaborative devising, in the late 1970s the company began to commission writers and nurtured the emergent careers of a number of playwrights, among them Bryony Lavery, Claire McIntyre, Timberlake Wertenbaker and Winsome Pinnock. At the end of the 1980s, as a response to financial pressures, the company abandoned its original collective style of management and pared down to a management team of five. Shortly afterwards, the group was re-named as The Sphinx Theatre Company and, under the artistic direction of Sue Parrish, continued throughout the 1990s to pursue a policy of commissioning new work or adaptations by women.[46] The company also hosted annual 'Glass Ceiling' conferences to provide a public platform for the discussion of the role and place of women in the arts.

The change of company name was a response to a desire to challenge an outmoded perception of the group as producing an 'agit-prop, political, seventies-style' of theatre.[47] 'The Sphinx Theatre Company' is a more 'enigmatic' and less descriptive name than The Women's Theatre Group, formerly radical in its indexing of a women's-only space for feminist theatre-making, but subsequently (especially given the demise of other women's companies) problematic in its implied homogeneity: one group as representative of all women.

The same problem obtains for the label 'woman playwright', which on the one hand claims a (political) identity, and on the other risks the reductive, essentialist 'fixing' of identity. The problem, as Butler observes, is how 'provisionally to institute an identity and at the same time to open the category as a site of permanent political contest'.[48] Three plays in the 1990s repertoire of The Sphinx

Theatre Company 'open up' the category of 'woman writer' and as a final, introductory point, help to reflect on the work by women playwrights that is detailed in this volume. The plays are Hélène Cixous's *Black Sail/White Sail* (1994), Pam Gems's *The Snow Palace* (1998) and Eileen Atkins's *Vita and Virginia* (1999). Respectively, these represent the lives of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, the Polish dramatist Stanislawa Przybyszewska, and Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. Each of the three plays points towards moments of crisis in the history of Europe: the prospect of Hitler in *Vita and Virginia*, the French Revolution in Stanislawa's writing, and Stalinist Russia in *Black Sail/White Sail.*

Of the writers given a dramatic treatment, Virginia Woolf arguably and easily is the best known – a reminder that 'canonical' writing is not an entirely male preserve. More importantly, however, is the way that Atkins's two-hander, drawing on the love-letters between Virginia and Vita, represents not one, but two writing lives where fictionalities and sexualities are not distinct but are constantly crossing over. Orlando, in Woolf's 'biography' Orlando, 'turns out to be Vita',[49] and 'writing', Vita observes '. . . is really the most intimate part of one'.[50] *Vita and Virginia* connects (sexualised) bodies to writing in a way that echoes Cixous's manifesto for an *écriture féminine*.

'Writing women' can take many different forms and there is no one style to characterise the work of women playwrights in the 1990s. Stylistically, they defy categorisation. What they do share, however, is, as Innes observed of post-1970s women's playwriting, a refusal of 'standard dramatic forms',[51] whether this is a revisioning of (white) realism by black and Asian women writers, Kane's more explosive treatment of realism in *Blasted*, Nagy's jazz-style compositions, Churchill's experiments with words and bodies, or Upton's techniques of mimetic distortion.

In Gems's *The Snow Palace*, the money and 'room of one's own' that Woolf argued as necessary to women's writing is reduced to a poor wooden hut. The writer Stanislawa lives and dies in abject poverty. Her work was not produced in her lifetime.[52] There is nothing romantic about her starving, penniless existence as a writer, and no way of surviving without the support of either state or family, all of which

is a salutary reminder for contemporary funding bodies and theatrical managements.

The snow bound, solitary woman writer offers a stark contrast to the subject of her writing: the French Revolution. Hers is an epic drama of revolutionary politics that conjures up the figures of Robespierre, Danton and St Just in public debates about issues of citizenship and democracy. In a contemporary world, Timberlake Wertenbaker observes that the opportunities for public debate are diminishing, making theatre as a public forum all the more important.[53] Like Stanislawa, it is the 'big issues' that attract contemporary women playwrights. As Rebecca Prichard argues 'plays where a writer has refused to limit the scope of her work to women's issues, but instead has simply written about the world' are those that she finds most exciting.[54] Critic Michael Billington also made this gendered observation: 'there is a new school of male playwrights fascinated by hermetic worlds. But there is an equally powerful corps of women playwrights capable of tackling anything under the sun: domestic and public violence, the problem of childless fortysomethings, late 20th-century despair'.[55] I would argue both of these slightly differently: that it is not so much a question of women playwrights turning to the 'world' as a subject, but of them *re-presenting women's issues as major issues of our time*. Violence towards the maternal reproductive body; the abuse of children and the increasing numbers of 'missing' children; the dispossessed communities of women, or the continued 'othering' of race, gender and sexuality, are not issues that concern a 'minority' of women, but are matters of local, national and international importance.

Theatre has the political power to stage the world that is and to invite us to see the other worlds that might be. Consequently, 'power', Cixous argues, 'is afraid of poetry [theatre]'.[56] In Cixous's *Black Sail/White Sail* Anna Akhmatova is punished on account of the subversive power of her poetry: her son, Liova, has been exiled to Siberia for seventeen years. Whether her son will come home and whether her poems will get published are the two issues that concern Anna. Both herald the possibility of a better future. Like the 'sisters' in Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Break of Day*, Anna and her circle

of female friends have lived in hope of a better future: 'for forty years we've been here craning our necks in an effort to leap up to Heaven'.[57] Perhaps, one of her friends suggests in the closing moments of the play, they might 'receive a telegram' in an afterlife telling them how things turned out: 'Poems arrived safely. Signed: on the banks of the 21st century' (*Black Sail/White Sail*, p.81).

Looking back from 'the banks of the 21st century', women's playwriting of the 1990s is shown to be concerned with the kind of future the world will inherit; which flag, the black or the white, it will 'sail' under is of major concern. The new century cannot, as the final image of Stanislawa frozen in the act of writing, her gaze directed towards the chair so recently vacated by the revolutionary Robespierre suggests (*Snow Palace*, p.71), be one where women are marginal to a politics of 'democratic' citizenship debated only by men. They must have parts to play; voices to be heard. In brief, as Faludi argued, 'women's hour on the stage is long, long overdue'.[58]