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Edited by Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt

Excerpt

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I

ELAINE ASTON AND JANELLE REINELT

A century in view: from suffrage to the
1990s

Early in 1998 both stages at the Royal Court, arguably England's most high-profile venue that supports new playwriting, were occupied by women playwrights: the late Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* played in the main house, Theatre Downstairs, while Rebecca Prichard's *Yard Gal* was premiered in the Theatre Upstairs studio. An outsider might be forgiven for thinking that the tables had finally turned: that women playwrights had at last achieved a significant presence at the close of the century. However, like several other 'stages' in our twentieth-century history of women's playwriting, the contemporary situation for women dramatists is far less propitious than one might at first suppose. Looking briefly at the 1998 productions of Kane and Prichard offers us a way into our *fin-de-siècle* moment of women's playwriting, and a way back to the different historical contexts of twentieth-century playwriting presented in this *Companion*.

*Kane and Prichard were contemporaries: both born in 1971; both from Essex; both university-educated (although Kane confessed that her experience of the Master's degree in playwriting at Birmingham University 'nearly destroyed her as a writer'),¹ and both were fortunate enough to launch writing careers through the Royal Court. There, however, the similarities end. Kane's playwriting career began in controversy over her first full-length play, *Blasted*, staged at the Court's studio venue in 1995, which outraged both the serious and the tabloid press for its scenes of horror – most particularly the cannibalism of a dead baby. Theatre critics were as enraged as they had been over Edward Bond's stoning-the-baby scene in *Saved* (Royal Court, 1965). Like *Saved*, *Cleansed* is also designed to re-awaken audience perception of our violent world through a theatrical style which 'shows', rather than 'tells' of, the persecution of a socially 'unacceptable' group of people whose bodies are variously injected with heroin, beaten, raped and hacked to pieces.

Unlike Kane, Prichard is more specific about the social class and gender of the communities in her plays. An apt description of Prichard's dramatic universe is one

* Regrettably, Kane committed suicide in February 1999, as our *Companion* was being prepared for production.

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1 Stuart McQuarrie as Tinker, Suzan Sylvester as Grace, and Daniel Evans as Robin, in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*

in which Caryl Churchill's prediction at the close of *Top Girls* – of a 'frightening' future for generations of young, underprivileged women – is seen to be coming true: *Essex Girls* (Royal Court, 1994) treats the issue of single, teenage mothers; *Fair Game*, an adaptation of Edna Mazya's *Games in the Backyard* (Royal Court, 1998), dramatises a teenage gang-rape; and *Yard Gal* tells of an all-female street gang from Hackney in London's East End. *Yard Gal* is narrated by two gang members, Boo who is black and Marie who is white, in the rhythms and slang of their East End, Caribbean street culture. Their lives are characterised by drugs, alcohol, prostitution, violence, and abuse. The girls look out for each other, band together to survive, but they live permanently on the edge of social acceptance and of survival.

Both Prichard's and Kane's theatrical landscapes are 'frightening', but in very different ways which it would be wrong to try and make 'fit' into some category of 'women's playwriting'. To a playwright like Kane, to be called a 'woman writer' was meaningless. She did not wish to be seen as a representative of a 'biological or social group'; gender, race or class issues were not her primary concern, rather she saw them as 'symptomatic of societies based on violence or the threat of violence' (*Rage & Reason*, pp. 133–5). Reviewing *Yard Gal* Benedict Nightingale observed that if such a play 'had been written 20, 15, even 10 years ago, it would have been very different', specifically, 'few dramatists of that era would have been able to resist making it abundantly evident that its two teenage characters were victims of society and society itself was in urgent need of insti-

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tutional reform'.² While Nightingale reveals his own prejudices against feminism, stating that this would necessarily have been an 'inferior' kind of writing, his observation does, however, point towards the way that times have changed. In the late 1990s, women are not writing the issue-based theatre out of the feminist moment twenty years ago, nor are they working in the climate of anger from ten years ago, when playwrights, just before the 1989 collapse of socialism in Central Europe, were protesting against the reactionary policies of the right-wing British government (as evidenced for example in Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987), or Kay Adshead's *Thatcher's Women* (1987)). Similarly, our purpose in this Companion is neither to provide an exhaustive list of writers, nor to claim a 'fixed' identity for British women playwrights, but to examine the changing social, theatrical, and cultural contexts in which plays by women have been able to flourish – or not – this century.

The extent to which women dramatists find a 'place' in theatrical activity, or initiate their own 'alternative', counter-cultural, oppositional theatre 'spaces', is determined by the material, political, cultural, geographical, and theatrical circumstances of the historical moment. Writing on the 1970s birth of *Sistren*, the Jamaican Women's organisation, Honor Ford-Smith describes the conditions which made *Sistren* possible as a moment of 'democratic opening': 'a moment in history in which there was a possibility for those who are oppressed to intervene in history and transform their society'.³ As we look back over different periods of British women's playwriting in this century, both in our introduction and in the volume overall, we shall see historical moments of 'democratic opening', moments when social transformation was deemed a possibility, but also decades where women's social and cultural status is so marginal as to make the possibility of change, of a more equal society, 'unthinkable'. This does not mean that women stop writing for theatre, but what they write about, in what form, and where, is subject to constraint as well as possibility. In the remainder of this introduction, we shall point out some of the major possibilities and constraints that shaped women's writing for the theatre in the central periods of the twentieth century.

Theatrical suffrage and suffrage theatre

In her chapter on 'The Vote' in her highly influential study *Hidden From History*, feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham sketches the campaigning activities of Emmeline Pankhurst and the suffrage organisation WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union) which she was instrumental in founding in 1903.⁴ Rowbotham's account of the growing militancy of the Pankhursts' campaign later in the decade, as the Liberal government under the leadership of Prime Minister Asquith showed no signs of listening to their 'cause', draws on a theatrical vocabulary. She explains that the militant campaign relied on 'publicity', 'sensation'

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and 'ever more dramatic gestures' (pp. 88–9). Actresses working in theatre in this historical moment were well placed to assist with spectacular representations of the 'cause'.

The AFL (Actresses' Franchise League) was formed in 1908 for actresses to pledge their support to the campaign for women's suffrage. Upon its inception, the AFL declared it would support all suffrage organisations. The two main organisations at this time were the WSPU and the NUWSS (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies), but they took very different stands over militancy. While militant action was characteristic of the WSPU, the NUWSS continued to campaign through the trade unions, insisting that working women needed the vote to improve their conditions of employment. The AFL had to consider its role in this more vigorous, direct style of campaigning which inevitably created tensions between those AFL members of a more peaceful persuasion and those many actresses attracted to the theatrical style of the WSPU which advocated 'deeds not words'.

Ultimately, it was neither reasoned debate nor direct action which was the most valuable contribution the League had to offer the campaign – rather it was the theatrical skills of its members. As women were largely unaccustomed to and unskilled at public speaking, actresses could use their training to help women with speaking at rallies. The skill of impersonation was particularly useful after the Prisoners' Temporary Discharge Act, more popularly known as the Cat and Mouse Act, which meant that militant women, imprisoned for their activities, might be temporarily discharged following hunger strikes, and then recalled to prison to continue their sentence. AFL members helped women with costumes and disguises to avoid recapture. Actresses could also help with the theatricality of demonstrations, staging political 'spectacles' in the hope of gaining public sympathy for the 'cause'. While the League had skills which it could offer the 'cause', the political climate of suffrage also encouraged women to learn a new skill – the skill of playwriting.

The masculinist managerial and organisational structures of Edwardian theatre offered little, if any, support to the woman playwright, but the demand for performances at suffrage events created a demand for writing. Consequently, the AFL set up a play department and appointed actress Inez Bensusan to run it.⁵ While Bensusan's repertoire included suffrage pieces by men and women, it was particularly significant that this venture created the opportunity for women to write and to see their work performed.

The style and content of this suffrage drama was largely determined by the occasion of the political event. Plays commissioned as entertainment for a rally or demonstration needed to suit different suffrage factions, rather than to please one organisation at the expense of another. The message needed to be clear and immediately accessible, politically instructive, and entertaining, which pro-

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moted a style of agitprop comic-realism. The practicalities of ‘touring’ to different parts of the country meant that pieces tended to be monologues or duologues requiring one or two actresses and minimal props, rather than plays with large casts demanding full-scale productions.

The political demands of writing agitprop suffrage drama, however, had its limitations, as is illustrated in Bensusan’s Women’s Theatre season at the Coronet Theatre, London, in 1913. Designed to create opportunities for women in areas of theatre work on and off the stage, the season’s two plays were, ironically, both written by men: Bjornstjerne Bjornson’s *A Gauntlet* (a Norwegian drama which treats the double standard of sexual morality) and Eugene Brieux’s *Woman On Her Own* (translated from the French by Charlotte Shaw, and focusing on women and employment).

The 1913 Women’s Theatre season is important, however, because it shows women moving into professional theatre on their own terms, rather than either asking actor–managers to give them work, or only performing in non-theatre, oppositional, political contexts. Julie Holledge gives a fascinating account of how Bensusan raised the capital for her season through the suffrage network, with an advance booking system which made the season a financial success (*Innocent Flowers*, p. 93). It showed what could be achieved when women could draw on a national, feminist network.

For a relatively small number of women who had successful careers as actresses, it was possible to take up a hierarchical position such as that of manager, or a status position, such as that of writer. If women were able to access the male domain of theatre management, then they could be supportive of other women’s work. For example, actress–manager and suffragette Lena Ashwell produced Cicely Hamilton’s *Diana of Dobson’s* (a comic-realist examination of the hardship facing unskilled middle-class women working as shop girls) during her management of the Kingsway Theatre in 1908. Given that, conventionally, women did not have the experience of, or access to, theatre to develop playwriting skills, it is perhaps not surprising to find some women playwrights emerging out of successful acting careers. Working as a performer was at least one way of discovering what would or would not work on the stage. Both Elizabeth Robins and Cicely Hamilton, for example, worked first as actresses and then as writers. While both women were involved in the AFL, they also had key roles in the WWSL (Women Writers’ Suffrage league) which Cicely Hamilton co-founded in 1908, and of which Elizabeth Robins was president.

Elizabeth Robins’s multi-faceted career – as actress, as political activist, as writer of journalism, plays, and fiction – is an interesting one to consider. American born, Robins spent much of her career in England, working in the theatre and for the ‘cause’. Like other playwrights in this volume, her first playwriting success was at the Court, then under the progressive Vedrenne–Barker

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management (1904–7), concerned with promoting ‘new drama’. Robins’s full-length suffrage drama *Votes for Women!*, was staged at the close of this venture in 1907. Not only did *Votes for Women!* bring the suffrage campaign into the theatre, but a quarter of the fee which Robins was paid went to the two main suffrage parties.⁶ That Robins’s career as a writer was so wide-ranging does not just reflect personal choice or ambition, but demonstrates how hard it was to be financially self-supporting as a playwright, unless part of the commercial system, playing long runs to large audiences.⁷ In our own time dramatists often combine playwriting with more lucrative writing for television and radio; Robins could not rely on her theatre contracts alone.

Yet her career as a performer had taught Robins the power of theatre as a live medium. Biographer Angela V. John explains how Robins, with the help of Cicely Hamilton, worked on turning her controversial but successful 1913 novel *Where are you going to . . . ?*, treating prostitution and the white slave trade, into a stage drama for a second Women’s Theatre season in 1914 (*Elizabeth Robins*, p.192). The Lord Chamberlain refused to grant the play a licence, but, in any event, any plans for a second Women’s Theatre season were overtaken by the outbreak of the First World War.

Votes for women and a backlash against feminism

It was not until 1928 that women were finally granted the same voting rights as men. In 1918 they achieved partial enfranchisement when women over thirty were given the vote. Although 1928 is, therefore, a landmark in women’s history, feminist historians are quick to indict the social conditions and conservatism of the post-war years as creating a time of great hardship for women, and a backlash against feminism. Women had been sorely needed to work in industries during the First World War, but as soon as it was over and the men came home, women were expected to get back to their ‘proper sphere’ of domesticity – whether this meant being back in their own home, or working as a low-paid domestic servant in somebody else’s. Irrespective of whether this was actually what women wanted to do – and many of them did not want to go back into the home – it was an impossible re-adjustment to make given the numbers of women needing to support themselves, and the incompatibility of industrial training with domestic employment.⁸ The sense of social dislocation – for women and for men – was acute. Feminist historian Martha Vicinus explains: ‘this takeover of male work left the men at the front feeling alienated and subtly emasculated. When they returned home, the women were forced out of their jobs; yet during the post-war economic dislocation many men could not find jobs nor could they regain their former ascendancy over women.’⁹

In consequence of these social conditions, the 1920s style of feminism was, as

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Angela V. John describes, ‘increasingly diffuse, even defensive’, and ‘the very word “feminism” became generally discredited’ (*Elizabeth Robins*, pp. 206–7). It was in many ways a decade of contradictions, of gains and losses for women: on the one hand there were some legislative reforms which worked to the benefit of women, such as the 1925 Pensions Act (which provided Old Age Pensions, Widows’ Pensions and Orphans’ Pensions), and on the other hand the Marriage Bar for teachers (meaning a woman could not maintain her employment if she married) was widely accepted in the early 1920s.¹⁰

As women were no longer united by a single issue (the vote), they campaigned on a range of diverse issues generally concerned with social reforms from which women might benefit – such as the campaigning for birth control led by Marie Stopes. The Six Point Group, founded in 1921 by the Welsh suffragette Lady Rhondda, was a political pressure group which raised six points which it urged the government to address: satisfactory legislation on child assault, and for the widowed mother, and for the unmarried mother and her child; equal guardianship; equality of pay for men and women teachers; equality of pay and opportunity for men and women in the Civil Service. Peace was also an issue for women after the War, although many became critical of the League of Nations (inaugurated in 1918) for its marginalisation of women’s involvement. Johns describes Robins’s view of the league ‘becom[ing] a League of Men, served by women in subordinate offices’ (*Elizabeth Robins*, p. 211).

With regard to conditions in the theatre in the 1920s, we should remember that there was no public subsidy at that time, and that theatre was either commercially or privately funded (usually through subscription schemes). Edy Craig’s women’s theatre company, The Pioneer Players, set up in the climate of suffrage in 1911, showed how difficult it was to survive as a subscription theatre, giving one performance of a work at small London theatres. While Craig’s company kept going throughout the War, lack of funds finally forced her to abandon regular productions at the beginning of the 1920s – although the company came together again to perform American playwright Susan Glaspell’s *The Verge* in 1925.¹¹

One opening for women who had been involved in the suffrage movement and suffrage drama was to continue their careers in regional repertory theatre, which begins to flourish at the turn of the century, in the wake of initiatives such as the Vedrenne–Barker management which produced *Votes for Women!* Although relying on the support of a wealthy individual or the backing of a community of civic dignitaries, repertory theatres were less commercially driven, and more receptive to new progressive drama. Annie Horniman of the Horniman tea family who used her private wealth to back the Gaiety Theatre Manchester from 1907 until 1917 is generally considered a pioneer of this movement. Her management encouraged new playwriting by men and women, and new playwriting

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which had a local flavour.¹² While Horniman's enterprise, and similar ventures – such as Alfred Wareing's attempts to establish a repertory theatre in Glasgow, Scotland – did not survive the War, the repertory initiative was sustained in two other major English cities – Liverpool and Birmingham.

The significance of an emergent repertory movement to women writers is exemplified by the playwriting career of Elizabeth Baker. Baker's socialist-feminist drama *Chains*, which premiered at the Court Theatre, London, in 1909, was revived at the Barker and Frohman's Repertory season at the Duke of York's, London, in 1910, at Manchester's Gaiety in 1911 and at Birmingham's Repertory Theatre in 1914. Subsequently, between 1915 and 1925 Baker had three new plays produced at Birmingham's Repertory Theatre. (Like the Manchester Gaiety, the Birmingham Rep. relied on the wealth of one individual – Barry Jackson.)

Women new to playwriting in the 1920s and 1930s also achieved careers on London's commercial West End stages, and, again, these women writers were often actresses before they became writers. Their writing was formally and ideologically conditioned by the 'malestream' of their theatrical and social lives; their dramatisations of women's lives raised a number of social issues but, like feminism itself, these were 'diffuse' and fragmented.

While the 1920s saw some cautious gains for women (the first English woman Cabinet Minister, Margaret Bondfield, was elected in 1929), Britain went into the 1930s in a financial crisis, bringing down the country's Labour government under Ramsay Macdonald in 1931.¹³ While unemployed Glaswegians joined the hunger march down to England's capital in 1932, another movement was on the march: the British Union of Fascists was founded by ex-Labour Party member Sir Oswald Mosley in 1932, the year before Hitler became Chancellor of Germany.

The 'dual role' for women

The Second World War had a profound effect on the lives of women, but not exactly in the ways it is sometimes claimed. Women did experience new employment opportunities, a more open sexual climate, and greater independence in the absence of their fathers, husbands, and brothers. The British government instituted compulsory registration of women in order to assign them to essential war work, which included engineering and munitions. Not only did these jobs disappear after the war, but it was also the case that women received unequal pay for their work during the war. Barbara Caine writes, 'Women received less training and less payment during their apprenticeship than men and were shunted back into lower-paid female occupations even before the war ended.'¹⁴ For example, Margaret Barraclough, retired company member of the socialist-feminist cabaret group *The Chuffinelles* (1986–93) and former crane-driver, recalls:

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When I first started in the steel-rolling mills working with the tongs on red-hot steel . . . there were lots of women doing these ‘men’s jobs’, thousands, they were driving cranes and trucks and welding. However, this was during the war. As soon as the war was over and the men started coming back, they were out of a job, most of them anyway. By this time I’d been crane-driving a few years and I taught some of these men to drive the cranes, and their starting wage was much higher than mine was.¹⁵

Moreover, as Caine stresses, ‘the war was followed by a powerful evocation of a traditional family, which ascribed to women a more domesticated role than they had ever actually undertaken’ (*English Feminism*, p. 228). The consolidation of the family and the beginning of the baby boom had a profound influence on women’s perceptions of their roles during the next decade. After the war, the 1,500 nurseries set up by 1944 to provide women with childcare were closed; they had served the temporary need of the nation (p. 228).

The Beveridge Report of 1943, which became the seminal document in establishing the post-war welfare state, was criticised by feminist groups still active from the earlier movement before the war. The Women’s Freedom League organised twelve women’s organisations to lobby the Ministry of Reconstruction:

Arguing that Beveridge denied women their rights as persons, they were particularly critical of women’s loss of insurance rights made prior to marriage and of all the contributions they had made prior to marriage . . . In the general climate of support for Beveridge, however, the critique of these equal rights feminists went largely unnoticed, especially as many women welcomed his proposals.¹⁶

There were, in fact, various organisations and societies that remained active after the war which were carry-overs from the more militant years of struggle for suffrage. The Six Point Group, for example, lasted until 1960. The militancy of the struggle for enfranchisement and equality, however, gave way to a post-war caution and concern with ‘feminine matters’, meaning the emphasis tended to be placed on individual women’s adjustment to their particular circumstances, and to the dominance of domesticity as the chief arena in which women ruled. In an influential book published in 1956, *Women’s Two Roles* by Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, the feminist plea that women should be able to have both marriage and career is accompanied by a clear message that work must always take second place in their lives. ‘This belief in women’s “dual role”’, Olive Banks writes, ‘in which a woman’s work must somehow be made to fit into her domestic responsibilities, continued into the 1960s, even amongst feminists’ (*The Politics Of British Feminism*, p. 24).

This description of the circumscription of women’s advocacy and advancement was, however, in tension with fundamental changes that were occurring in society. At the end of the war, the Marriage Bar for teachers was abolished (see

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n. 10), and in 1945 women were first admitted into the police force. The Marriage Bar was abolished in the Civil Service in 1946, and in 1948 the British Nationality Act allowed British women to retain their nationality on marriage. The struggle for equality resulted in equal pay for men and women as teachers in 1952 and in the Civil Service in 1954. People married younger but also divorced more often. Divorce petitions increased by 20,000 after the war. One in fifteen marriages ended in divorce, compared to one in sixty in 1937.¹⁷

The empire was also breaking up: the botched attempt to overthrow the revolutionary government of Colonel Nasser in 1956 is often cited as the decisive event. The Cold War was creating a kind of paranoia and insularity which reinforced a strong ideology of internal security and external containment. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that women were preoccupied with managing the rising tensions facing them in their daily lives. Enfranchised but not empowered, 'equal' in imagination more often than law, and genuinely perplexed by the 'dual role' dilemma, these women of the 1950s and early 1960s were very concerned about their quality of life in the context of the conservative climate of their times. Susan Bennett's perceptive essay in part 1 explains the dramas written by women grappling with these issues on their stages. While the differences between them and the generation of women who revolted in an open way in the late 1960s forming the 'Second Wave' of feminism seem to eclipse their similarities, it is worth stressing that the need for financial security, access to employment, protection and support for selves and children, and the desire for personal happiness have motivated women throughout the post-war period to seek to understand and to change their circumstances.

Happy Anniversary?

1968 is a year when a 'democratic opening' for different oppressed peoples was thought to be possible. As a decade the 1960s is characterised as a time of radical politics (sexual and political): the Black, New-left and anti-Vietnam movements in America; the 'Cultural Revolution' in China in 1966; and the anti-government protests of students in Paris 1968. Closer to 'home', 1968 saw an escalation of Civil Rights activism in Northern Ireland. While none of these movements in the 1960s were primarily concerned with women, they voiced the struggles of oppressed groups, communities, or countries in ways which women could relate to. In Northern Ireland specifically, for example, women involved in the Civil Rights activism would be instrumental in founding the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement in the mid-1970s.

For women in England, 1968 was the fiftieth anniversary of first being given the vote (albeit on unequal terms with men). Discontent with marriage, domesticity and motherhood was on the increase.¹⁸ The year 1968 is also remembered