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