

Maggie Gale

Absence and Evidence

Wrestling with History

The lesson learnt was that we as women theatre historians had a number of burgeoning tendencies which went against our own desire to create a linked chain of women working in theatre throughout history. We adhered to ready-made frameworks - pre-defined "periods" of theatre history - and we created closed frameworks into which we had to fit evidence - feminist theatre was one of these.

Unlike many of the women in this issue, I have never experienced true economic or domestic struggle and am both grateful and lucky in this. I am white, western and middle class and so my struggles have been far more internal and shaped by privilege. I am a mother and I am an academic, a theatre historian.

My father was an academic and my mother, after being a very young mother, became a teacher - within the English class system this meant that I was middle class - and so, even though I am a woman and because it was the 1980s, I went to a good university and completed a degree in Theatre Studies. We had some very dreadful teachers - I thought at the time - but one or two of them were inspirational and somehow didn't fit in with the intellectual and pedagogical patterns that the others were so entrenched in. It was these inspirational teachers who created a syllabus which reflected what was actually happening in theatre and in theatre studies rather than re-hashing ready-made conservative courses based on traditional views of what theatre had been and should be. They introduced us to the work of Odin Teatret, Théâtre du Soleil, Étienne Decroux, La Mama, Trisha Brown, The San Francisco Mime Troupe, Augusto Boal and so on. It was, largely because of the few inspirational tutors, one of the few university theatre degrees in Britain to offer such a variety of approaches in the early 1980s. Even so, we rarely studied any theatre written or made by women - there were a few names touched upon, but the politics of women's struggle to find a place in theatre history or even a voice in theatre, was not a subject, an issue or an area of focus. Within the discipline academics were slow to re-vision theatre history through the lens of feminism - literary studies and art history had at least a decade's advance. I came out of university with only a small amount of knowledge about the fact that women had always had a presence within the creative process of making theatre, but it was this knowledge which made me want to know more.

I went to work in various jobs whilst continuing my studies. Supported by a very wise woman who had also taught

me on occasion, I wrote a research dissertation on women playwrights whose work was produced in London between the end of the First World War and the early 1960s - this eventually became a book. During the years of research, many publications came out which documented and sometimes analysed the different contributions women had in fact made to the construction of a world of theatre, a theatre history. Many of these focused, in the British context, on two particular areas: feminist theatre, in which I became less and less interested as the definition of feminist became more and more narrow, and the early political theatre of the suffrage movement, headlined by the Actresses Franchise League.

Set up in the late Edwardian period, the AFL was an organisation which firstly used theatre and the processes of theatre to promote the struggle for the vote, and secondly aimed to improve the employment position of women working in theatre. This historical example of women's struggle, both political and professional, within theatre began to interest me more and more. What was interesting was the way in which research into this area forced a shift in the framework through which we understood theatre history, or so I thought. The women I had originally undertaken research on worked largely within a commercial theatre - in the mainstream. They wrote for middle and upper class audiences, and at first seemed not to be interested in women's rights. But of course the more I looked at their undocumented work the more I realised that many of them were as concerned about women's social and economic position as their Edwardian forebears had been. But the frameworks in which they expressed their concern were different. Equally, of course, many of them had worked in the Edwardian theatre and were part of the AFL, an overtly political organisation.

The lesson learnt was that we as women theatre historians, had a number of burgeoning



tendencies which went against our own desire to create a linked chain of women working in theatre throughout history. We adhered to ready-made frameworks - pre-defined "periods" of theatre history - and we created closed frameworks into which we had to fit evidence - feminist theatre was one of these. One of the false frameworks was made for us through an attitude to theatre history which is now out of favour, one which followed patterns of traditional history *per se*. And the other was created by a desire to frame the past in terms of the present, one in which women were generally finding a new political voice, a feminist voice. At the point at which I became, professionally, an academic, I decided that I wasn't interested in closing down history but that rather, like many others whose work I respected on the British and American scene - Susan Bassnett, Tracy.C. Davis, Jacki Bratton and Viv Gardner - I wanted to open history out, to find new ways of envisaging and historicising women's contribution to the theatres of the past. I wanted to find new ways of validating and assessing women's theatre work.

Susan Bassnett once wrote about the ways in which theatre history's traditional reliance on literary texts meant that a great deal of work carried out by women has been made and continues to be made invisible. Her *Struggling with the Past: Women's Theatre in Search of a History*, was a seminal article which articulated some of the problems of theatre history when it came to including women's work. Equally, I used to carry Tracy C. Davis's statement that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence", around with me in my head whenever I was working on tracing women's work. Ironically, I still look to texts as my starting point, but as Jacki Bratton has always stressed, texts are multi-various: we can look at diaries, autobiographies, biographies, programmes, reviews, letters and testimonials as well as plays, playbills, cartoons, journalism and the dreaded theatre history books, in order to find

what it is we are looking for. I began my studies believing that theatre could *do something*, could make a difference and now believe the same of a history of women in theatre.

My original research into women playwrights on the British stage between 1918 and 1962 provided a link in a chain between two overtly political theatre movements at the turn of the 19th and 20th century and the feminist theatres of the late 20th century. The link in the chain was made of a different metal but it was nevertheless strongly connective. Following on from this, further research makes links between the professional lives of women working in the theatre in England with those in America and Europe. Some of the articles in this issue of *The Open Page* and in previous issues make strong the case for seeing a number of emergent patterns in a history of women in theatre, if in fact such a generalised history is possible. Firstly, there have always been women working in theatre, certainly from the 1500s onwards. Secondly, most of these women, even those who were aristocratic by birth or at least had some kind of financial independence, have struggled for recognition, in their own time and culture and in theatre history. Thirdly, women performers and other theatre workers have always been less economically valued than their male counterparts, even when it is they who have brought huge audiences into the theatres. When there are exceptions to this rule, such as in the case of Sarah Bernhardt or Ellen Terry in the literary theatres of their day, there is an overdrive in media interest in their private lives - the public is guided towards reading these women as private individuals rather than professionals. Fourthly, even though work may be commercially successful, these women often don't make it into the history books. Fifthly, periods of political unrest have often produced women who make theatre which reflects unrest and cultural shifts. And finally, women in theatre often get little historical recognition because they are

not considered to have "ideas" but merely technique; they are the women behind the great men, the muse, the inspiration or the nurturer. But theatre, of all the arts, is communal - and without a team the event cannot happen... Theatre is not made by one person - our cultures construct creativity on an individualistic basis and so this is reflected in the analysis and history of creativity.

When I struggle with writing histories of women in theatre I struggle to look at each piece of evidence afresh, to constantly see it in a number of contexts through a number of different historians' lenses. Wrestling with history is a struggle - a struggle against my own wish to find certain things as opposed to others. For example, theatre is often a very conservative reflection of cultural formations and so women working within it may also be rather conservative. I find this difficult: I want to find the equivalent of Frida Kahlo or Rosa Luxembourg. I also struggle within the academic world to find ways of re-forming theatre history to include the work done by women, and to encourage a change in historiographical practice so that the evidence of women's practice can in turn change the ways in which we construct history.

As a teacher, in an educational environment where most of our students are women - a ratio of something like three to one in the British university system - I struggle to find ways of integrating women's theatre practice into the general syllabus so that the education these women experience is more inclusive of and positive about work created by women. Sometimes this works and students feel inspired to find out more, sometimes I am greeted with negative comments such as, "Why are we studying theatre made by women who don't like men!?" I point out that Rebecca West once said something along the lines that a feminist is a woman who differentiates between herself and a doormat, and that this is not about hating men but rather about vali-

dating women. In terms of research, I too want to find the great theorist, the great idealistic theatre inventor of the past - the female equivalent of Antonin Artaud - but I also love the ways in which women's work in theatre so often contrasts with "greatness" on these terms. So for example, recent work on a British woman who worked as an actress and then as a producer in the 1900s through to the 1930s turns up no end of theory on acting, on the place of theatre in the community, on the possibilities of a poor theatre - it is just that this doesn't exist in one book or article or archive, it needs to be put together. I struggle with it, but I get a perverse enjoyment out of scrabbling around in order to construct a possible history. Women all over the world have struggled to make theatre, and to be seen to be making theatre, but through the struggle comes meaning and expression and this surely, is a good way to spend a life.

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