
**Innovations In The British Feminist
Theatre With Special Reference To
The Plays Of Pam Gems And Louise Page**

A Thesis

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Introduction

The gender of a character implies not only a set of biological characteristics, but also maintains social and political assumptions about the personality, the power, and the place of this character in the world. On account of their gender, women have been excluded from public life as well as from the theatre. It was not till the latter part of the seventeenth century that women were allowed to perform on public stages and consequently began to break the tradition of male drama and function as playwrights. Women playwrights became more powerful and their productions more effective with the rise of feminism.

With the evolution of second-wave feminism which flourished in the second-half of the twentieth century, and the subsequent development of the feminist theatre movement, women playwrights challenged traditional male dominance in the theatre. They have become most persistent about the establishment of a new feminist perspective which speculates women's place in culture and rediscovers women's position in the world. However, the accomplishment of a new feminist perspective could not be achieved except through a renovation of theatrical methods and contents. Elaine Showalter describes the phases of the evolution of a female tradition of writing in the following:

First, there is a prolonged phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages, Feminine, Feminist and Female. These are obviously not rigid categories, distinctly separable in time, to which individual writers can be assigned

with perfect assurance. The phases overlap; there are feminist elements in feminine writing, and vice versa. ¹

Because of the confusion between feminist writing and women's writing, and the overlapping of the two modes as indicated by Showalter, the term 'feminist theatre' evolves as a problematic term, worthy of examination. However, material on feminist theatre, necessary to offer description and definition, is difficult to collect for several reasons: media coverage and reviews of feminist theatre productions are lacking, many feminist theatres are community centered and largely unknown outside their town, and many feminist groups are transitory, making identification and location difficult.

To further complicate the problem, much of the existing literature on feminist theatre offers descriptions of feminist theatre that appear quite different. On the one hand, some feminists believe that feminist theatre is a means of exploring women's identity, potentialities and experiences. Linda Killian comments:

Generally, most will agree that feminist theatre is theatre written by women which tries to explore the female psyche, women's place in society and women's potential. ²

As such, feminist theatre is mainly concerned with women's problems and experiences but is not necessarily political in intention, nor does it attempt to impel women to change their status. It merely charts their experience. Cindy Nemser clarifies this point further by saying that 'any art that reflects a woman's immediate personal experience has the right to be called feminist art.' ³ In this sense, feminist theatre is about women and their struggles, dramatised by women playwrights.

On the other hand, Dinah Leavitt refuses to consider the notion of feminist theatre as 'by, for and about women'. For her, such a definition is

'superficial' because feminist dramatists write for political purposes. ⁴ In this sense, feminist theatre is political showing public interest and exposing laws and unquestioned social codes impinging unfairly and destructively upon the lives of women. Individual though the protagonists of such a feminist theatre may be, what happens to the one character is no longer the result of an isolated fate but rather the outcome of historically unfair but alterable conditions which are inherently unjust to a segment of society, namely women. In consequence, feminist theatre becomes a tool for demonstrating the relationship between the individual and the social, the personal and the public. Judy Chicago comments on the public and the private in performances:

When we performed, the audience was usually shocked, then fascinated by the fact that we were bringing the 'private' sphere into the light, making the private public, and in so doing, taking a large step toward bridging the cultural chasm between men and women. ⁵

Hence, feminist theatre is political. The intimate connections between the personal experience of a single woman and the political issues of all women are the subject of feminist drama. Elizabeth Wray aptly sums up the political role of feminist theatre:

In theatre, as in politics, as in life, we have the choice of working inside or outside of the accepted system. If we view our public mode of expression – the theatre – as one form of political life, the playwright has the choice of becoming the bureaucrat or the guerilla. We can sit back and watch a procession of cuffs push our plays through the correct channels to an agreed – upon destination. Or we can liberate our ideas and dreams by digging our own channels to places we have never seen before. ⁶

Hence, life and politics are combined in the theatre and the feminist playwright discovers, confronts and persuades.

However, because feminist theatre grew out of the radical feminist movement of the 1960s, it adopted the ideologies of the movement,

emphasizing the personal nature of political action, the need for co-operation and solidarity, and the necessity to struggle for freedom. In consequence, the contemporary feminist theatre is, therefore, the expression of women's personal experiences and struggles for independence and freedom from oppression. It mainly represents female characters challenged by conditions and problems caused by their womanhood. Conscious of the outside forces which threaten to destroy or alter their selfhood, these women are caught at the moment when they recognize the need for asserting control, not only over their immediate world, but, more importantly, over themselves.

Contemporary feminist theatre is often a communal experience dedicated to an ideology that fosters sisterhood. Rather than competing with each other, feminist theatre group members are supportive of each other, establishing relations of mutual trust and openness in discussing personal, collective and political feelings and problems. Hence, the plays display women supporting and interacting with each other to promote new feelings of identity and solidarity. Brenda Robinson Hancock observes that such efforts are made by feminists 'to avoid negative criticism, in order to heighten the image of women, avoid condescension, and emphasize the validity of women's ideas and experiences'.⁷

Women actors of the feminist theatre develop new acting perspectives which combine personal feelings and universal issues. This approach to acting, wherein the actor is both herself and the character, reflects the feminist concern with consciousness - raising and the personal as political. Coss, Segal and Sklar comment:

We witness the woman performer as she applies consciousness and choice in her presentation of self and character at the same time ... We see a woman in the playing space who is just herself. Then we see her

enact another and also herself at the same time. We also see her comment on it.⁸

In the feminist theatre, the woman actor communicates her experience to an audience that identifies with her, then realizes the parallelism between her situation and theirs. Finally the audience contemplates change and attempts to alter conditions. Hence, a new dramatic process of audience participation is created in feminist theatre. Roberta Sklar explains:

The woman identification does not end at footlights. The playwright, communicating in a 'new voice' is recreating the audience as she speaks directly to woman's experience, sensibility, concerns As women create theatre from the centre of our female identity, this process of redefinition of self, of the material and structure of theatre, and of audience unfolds. This is perhaps the most transforming aspect of what we are bringing to the theatre.⁹

Most feminist theatre groups reject hierarchical structures and, instead, form nonhierarchical collective structures. Hence, they collectively conceive a text and collectively make decisions concerning form. Collective scripting overcomes the usual management politics and competition between members of established theatres, and also avoids a traditional hierarchical structure that consistently oppresses and ignores women. The ideology underlying hierarchical structure sustains a system of power and domination whereby the male is dominant and female, subordinate. Therefore, feminist theatre's refusal to abide by hierarchical structure is also a rejection of patriarchal ideology which fosters individualism in the form of a leader and followers, wherein the leader is usually a male.

In addition to consciousness raising, rejection of hierarchical structures, communal experiences of sisterhood and solidarity, universalizing personal experiences, and new author/performer/audience interaction, feminist theatre is also rhetorical, the rhetoric of which is to discover a new identity for the contemporary feminist woman and to raise its audiences'

consciousness to the new feminist perspective. Patti Gillespie observes that 'all feminist theatres are rhetorical enterprises' because they use theatre 'to promote the identities of women, to increase awareness of the issues of feminism, or to advocate corrective change.'¹⁰ However, contemporary feminist theatre realizes the futility of traditional concepts of persuasion by a leader who adapts to the audience's needs and leads them to specific ~~commitment or group action. Hence, the rhetoric of feminist theatre is one~~ of consciousness – raising that rejects passivity and submission, protests against ingrained ideas about women, and produces plays which discuss how to change the social system and women's position. According to Anselma Dell'Olio, the purpose of the new feminist repertory is to:

contribute to the liberation of women from centuries of political, social economic, and above all cultural oppression. By this we mean not just to give women a chance in the arts, though necessarily, feminist theatre will be composed mostly of women, but primarily to give a dramatic voice to the new feminist movement.¹¹

Realising that women are different in terms of age, class, ethnic, origin, income and even geography, the main purpose of feminist drama is to consider these differences and to create a sense of autonomy that addresses women in terms of private and concrete individual experience.

Generally speaking, the message of feminist theatre is : the death of the traditionally male-identified woman who was condemned to acquiesce to her own oppression, having been socialized into accepting male definition of her identity, the rebirth of woman as subject, instead of object, and the emergence of the new feminist perspective of womanhood. Woman is thus made subject to herself and to the audience. Judy Chicago comments:

Asserting their own self-definition was an implicit step toward challenging the culture, and demanding that it adjust its definition of women to correspond to the reality of women's lives. Once a woman has challenged the basic values that define her, those that tell her what she is supposed to be as a woman, she will inevitably challenge others

as she discovers in her creative journey that most of what she has been taught to believe about herself is inaccurate and distorted. It is with this differing self-perspective that the woman artist moves into the world and begins to define all aspects of experience through her own modes of perception, which, at their very base, differ from society's¹²

Hence, the feminist playwright raises the audience's consciousness and presents information that de-mystifies relationships between individuals and institutions. The outcome is a commitment to feminist convictions through what Elizabeth J. Natalle terms as 'recognition', 'connection', 'identification' and 'realization'.¹³ The audience recognize the death of the traditionally dominated woman; they connect the personal experience on the stage with their own lives; they identify with the woman who rejects oppression and strives for freedom, autonomy and independence; finally, they realize that no change will occur unless woman controls her destiny. A new reality ensues through personal testimony, participation and dialogue, self-revelation and self-criticism. Eventually, the woman in the audience realizes her own dilemma, feels oneness with other women on the stage, reflects upon women's separation, considers change, and finally celebrates. Later, feminist theatre allows its spectators to see their society in its wholeness, its interrelationships and its structures of power through a new perspective. Szanto explains that such an approach

presents a critique of choices made by the protagonists within that world and will suggest alternative modes of action which might come about when a protagonist's consciousness has reached the point at which he or she can sense the possibility of alternative action.¹⁴

In short, feminist theatre is a political expression of the personal experiences of women. It is an outcome of the feminist movement of the second-half of the twentieth century and hence, reflects its ideology. Feminist theatre adopts the strategies of consciousness-raising and non-hierarchical structures in order to give vent to the personal feelings,

experiences and dilemmas of women and to transfer these into the public arena. As such, feminist theatre achieves persuasion and communication to influence the audience with feminist convictions. In order to achieve its goals, feminist theatre employs modern experimental techniques to create new visions of women and promote new structures of reality. However, feminist theatre cannot be reduced to a list of characteristics but is best understood as a representation of a world view, a lived experience by women. Hence, feminist theatre is a re-evaluation not only of theatre, but of everyday experience, a re-vision of hope, care and attachment to the human community.

Both Pam Gems and Louise Page belong to the feminist theatre and its reaction against the oppression and subordination of women. Like most feminist playwrights they share the same beliefs and convictions of feminist ideology and embrace women's autonomy, freedom and independence. What is characteristic about them, however, is , that, unlike all the others, they express their feminist beliefs and concepts in an almost similar way, in plays of a complementary nature. That most feminist dramatists share common viewpoints is undoubted, but to have two playwrights sharing the same vision concerning autonomy, oppression, economic pressures and family relations is unique.

An examination of the plays of Gems and Page manifests great similarity in their quality of thought, personal interests and political allegiance. Both are British socialist feminists whose works are marked by a distinctive awareness of class and of women. Both advocate contemporary pro-family feminism which cherishes the family and venerates marriage and motherhood. Despite the fact that both refuse to be nominated as 'women playwrights', yet they write plays focusing mainly on women and expressing their experiences and dilemmas. Though they both deny allegiance to

organized politics, their plays exhibit a keen interest in sexual politics. Although Gems is now sixty-seven years old, her plays cut across generations and express the concerns, interests and experiences of not only older women but also younger ones. She is receptive to all that is new. Similarly, Page, who is only now thirty-seven years old, shows an understanding of the psychology and inherent emotional and physiological changes and desires of older women as well as younger ones.

Published plays for each dramatist to illustrate her themes and substantiate her technique are chosen on the grounds that every two plays, one by each dramatist, represent a similar viewpoint or experience. Gems' Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi and Page's Golden Girls are variations on the autonomy theme. Both plays present groups of women striving for autonomy and self-fulfilment. Gems' Loving Women and Page's Real Estate speculate the position of the family and the roles of the wife and the mother in the contemporary world. Camille by Gems and Salonika by Page deal with the effect of economic pressures on women's freedom of choice and course of life. Aspects of female oppression such as violence, sex-role stereotyping, female sexuality and commercial exploitation are examined in Gems' Piaf and Queen Christina as well as Page's Tissue and Beauty and the Beast. In spite of tackling the same subjects, their plays remain varied and individualized as to dramatic representation and mode of expression. As such, their dramas throw light on the similarities and differences in dramatic production and the delineation of female identity.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the innovations of the modern British feminist theatre in examining women's dilemma and dramatizing women's struggle for autonomy and self-assertion with reference to the plays of Pam Gems and Louise Page. The thesis is composed of an introduction and four chapters:

The Introduction presents a definition of the contemporary feminist theatre as a political expression of the personal experiences, feelings and dilemmas of modern women.

Chapter One: Feminism and The Feminist Theatre is a historical survey of feminism both as a socio-political movement and as a theatrical tradition. It examines the rise of first-wave feminism in the latter part of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century as a result of inequality, oppression and the double standard of morality against women. With second-wave feminism in the second half of the twentieth century, a new shift in the paradigm of personal relationships between men and women evolved. During the Second World War, women entered the labour force while their husbands were at the front. A tendency to coerce women to retreat again from public life and labour production and to be restrained within the narrow confines of domesticity and biological reproduction prevailed after the war when the men returned. But women could no longer tolerate such oppression, protested against male domination and struggled for autonomy and freedom. Hence the concern with sexual politics in contemporary feminist plays as an outcome of the radical feminist movement of 1969 - 1970. The differing ideological concepts of feminist thinkers are examined, and the solemn impact of these ideologies upon the various types of feminist theatres and playwrights is also studied. Both the plays of women playwrights who were influenced by the changing political conditions of the war period and were challenged by the male virility images produced by the war, and the plays by male playwrights who are interested in the problems of women, are examined to help distinguish between these plays and the plays of contemporary women feminists. The contemporary feminist theatre movement in Britain is largely based on the works of Michelene Wandor, Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems on the one