

Theatre & is a long series of short books which hopes to capture the restless interdisciplinary energy of theatre and performance. Each book explores connections between theatre and some aspect of the wider world, asking how the theatre might illuminate the world and how the world might illuminate the theatre. Each book is written by a leading theatre scholar and represents the cutting edge of critical thinking in the discipline.

We have been mindful, however, that the philosophical and theoretical complexity of much contemporary academic writing can act as a barrier to a wider readership. A key aim for these books is that they should all be readable in one sitting by anyone with a curiosity about the subject. The books are challenging, pugnacious, visionary sometimes and, above all, clear. We hope you enjoy them.

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theatre & feminism

Introduction

Theatre & Feminism tells the story of the movement known as feminist performance theory and criticism, the lens through which scholars understand theatre and performance practices that take gender difference, and gendered experience, as their primary social and political focus. This story, then, is about women and theatre, women at the theatre and women in and of the theatre; but it is also more than that. Above all, it is about how feminist theatre theory and practice allows us to understand the way *all* gender is constructed and reinforced in performance, for better and for worse, and for all human beings on the planet – be they men, women, transpersons or others. “Feminism” remains a contentious term (more on that in a moment), but for me it is the best and most accurate term to use when thinking about gendered experience from a human rights perspective. Any human being worried about discrimination on the

basis of gender or sexual orientation will have some affinity with the term, whether or not they realize it; similarly, this book aims to demonstrate the many ways that feminist scholars and makers of theatre and performance have enabled, and continue to enable, productive discussions about women's (and others') experiences of gender, sexuality, political power and human rights, both on and off the stage.

My version of this story begins in 2005. That August, Jill Dolan – one of my mentors, and the author of the pioneering 1988 book *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* – began writing her popular blog, *The Feminist Spectator*. I spent the spring of that year working on my postdoctoral research with Jill in the Performance as a Public Practice programme at the University of Texas, Austin. The lessons of her feminist practice – as a scholar, a teacher and a spectator to the many shows we watched together – stayed with me after I returned to Canada, thickening and re-politicizing my own feminist archive and shaping the way I tackled my first academic job. Thanks to Jill's revitalization of the "Feminist Spectator" brand on her blog, 2005 became indelibly linked in my imagination with its origins in her 1988 book, and the connection prompted me to think about the trajectory feminist performance theory and criticism had taken over the intervening 17 years. Was the movement that had so fully shaped my own research, teaching, theatrical tastes and political imagination now properly "history"? If it was "history" and yet remained urgently relevant to me, what was different about it today, and what had *not* changed? Given Dolan's deliberate choice to turn her acclaimed book into a blog directed at a

public audience, could we argue that feminist performance criticism, like so much contemporary feminism, had gone "mainstream," become the norm or status quo rather than a movement pushing in from the margins? If that was indeed the case, why should we still keep talking about it?

These are the questions that have framed my engagement with feminist performance scholarship over the last few years, and that remind me never to take the value and impact of my commitment to feminist critique for granted. The research questions that drive this book embed these questions, but also extend them. First, I ask: what did feminist performance theory and criticism aim to achieve when it broke onto the critical scene in the 1970s and 1980s, and how did it go about the task? What critical strategies in use then are still in use now, and what new critical strategies have feminist scholars and makers of theatre and performance adopted, and adapted, as the political landscape has shifted between then and now? Second, I ask: why is this form of criticism still important – indeed, to my mind, still *vital* – for students, scholars and makers of theatre today? How have shifts over time in the popular meaning of the label "feminist" affected the ways we might perceive theatre and performance work that openly identifies as such – or that *refuses* to identify as such? How might fresh work by feminist scholars and makers today help us to understand the limitations, even the dangers, of imagining that we now live in a "post-feminist" age?

The bulk of this book is devoted to exploring the history of feminist performance theory and criticism alongside

its lively contemporary afterlife. In three main sections I examine three central frameworks that feminist scholars and makers have used to unpack the way gendered experiences are both represented on stage and also manufactured in performance in order to seem “given” or “natural” both on stage and in the world outside the theatre. Each section – “looking/watching/spectating”; “being versus acting”; and “hope and loss” – discusses influential theoretical texts, engages with critical debates, and features a very recent case study that demonstrates how the strategies discussed in the section can be applied to work being made and shown in theatres right now. In my conclusion I look at recent work by Peggy Shaw – arguably the most influential Anglophone feminist performer of the late twentieth century – in order to think about what happens to the feminist performance body (the body of the artist as well as the body of the critic) as we all get older in a world where women over a certain age (sadly, about 40) remain pitifully under-represented in public life and especially invisible in Hollywood and on Broadway. Before we reach the shores of these histories, however, I want to spend some time addressing my second research question, and with it those readers who might wonder if “feminism” itself ought not, by now, be history.

Feminism now: the paradox of “post”

I’m writing this book in summer and autumn 2014; for many women (especially white, middle-class women) in the Anglophone West (which broadly includes the US, Canada,

Australia, New Zealand and the UK, as well as South Africa and pockets of Asia), things have never been better. Michelle Obama is First Lady of the United States. Kathleen Wynne, an “out” lesbian, was recently elected premier of my home province of Ontario. The world is mourning the passing of African-American author and activist Maya Angelou, remembering her as one of the most important public figures of the twentieth century. Major TV stars like Lena Dunham (creator, writer and star of the major HBO hit *Girls*) are open, proud feminists, unafraid to speak their minds or their politics in public. In the pop music industry, a hothouse of conservative attitudes about femininity, icons Beyoncé and Taylor Swift have declared themselves feminists too. In the UK, authors Caitlin Moran (*How to Be a Woman*, 2012), Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett (*The Vagenda: A Zero Tolerance Guide to the Media*, 2014) are enormously popular as they aim forceful, satirical arrows at the now visibly retrograde social attitudes that continue to get in women’s way. Haitian-American writer Roxane Gay addresses the other side of that coin in her new book of essays, *Bad Feminist* (2014), which describes the often-hilarious challenges of living and working as a feminist while also enjoying dating, sex and popular culture. Meanwhile, Laura Bates’s *Everyday Sexism* project has gone viral, expanding to multiple countries and attracting more than 200,000 followers on Twitter alone. Women occupy high-profile public roles as doctors, lawyers, professors, engineers and politicians throughout Europe, Asia

and the Americas. Many women feel very safe on the streets alone; many women feel able to move through the world as they please. These gains, these freedoms, are what feminism has, for over a hundred years now, been fighting for.

This is the bright, cheerful, front-of-house view. If I glance backstage for a moment, however, the picture darkens. Bates's *Everyday Sexism* project is wildly popular online – but this popularity simply means that many of the virulently sexist attitudes we often ascribe to a pre-feminist past are still alive and well today. Bates has also been the victim of significant trolling (Holman), another regular feature of contemporary life for women in the public sphere. Julia Gillard, the first female prime minister of Australia, was hounded from office in 2013 by a parliament openly hostile to her status as a (married but childless) woman. Michelle Obama is *First Lady*, not President; her husband handily beat Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination and, unlike Clinton, was rarely asked about his fashion preferences in the process. Though stars like Dunham are setting bold examples for young women in the media and in Hollywood, only 28 per cent of speaking parts in the top 100 films of 2012 were played by women (Bates 184).

In the theatre industry, the statistics on gender equity are equally troubling. A 2009 study undertaken by Emily Glassberg Sands in the US revealed not only systemic discrimination against women playwrights in that country, but that this discrimination was driven primarily by *female* literary managers and artistic directors (Cohen). Glassberg Sands's work thus exposed the extent to which ingrained biases

toward women and their abilities inhere in both men and women in patriarchal societies. In 2006, a similar study on Canadian theatre industry trends revealed that no more than one third of "key positions of creativity and authority," including artistic directorships, roles as directors and published playwrights, were occupied by women (Burton ii). The picture is considerably more grim for non-white women working in the theatre (see Perkins and Richards, and Catanese), TV and film in the Anglosphere; we also need to remember that non-white women face significantly increased hostility and danger compared to white women when out in public, both in democratic states as well as in states where girls and women remain second-class citizens, if citizens at all.

All of which brings us to the paradox of post-feminism. "Post-feminist" is the term some critics use to describe a historical moment (roughly the period after the mid-1980s) in which men and women appeared to have achieved gender equality in the workplace and in the public sphere, and thus in which the original goals of feminist theory and practice appeared redundant. As the quite informative and relatively accurate Wikipedia page for "Postfeminism" puts it, "Postfeminism gives the impression that equality has been achieved and that feminists can now focus on something else entirely." Equality, however, takes many forms, and inequality can be insidious in ways that are deeply felt, yet not immediately visible on the surface of our daily experiences. To return to the evidence I cited above: how can women living in post-industrial democracies have attained so much and yet remain, statistically speaking, still so far

from their primary goals? If many women *feel*, day-to-day, free and equal, how can it be that a feminist politics they associate with their mothers and grandmothers is not only not outmoded but also still necessary?

Feminism, post-feminism and neoliberalism

The British theorist Angela McRobbie offers some helpful explanations for how the paradox of post-feminism emerged over the last three decades, alongside the rise of the political movement known as neoliberalism. According to McRobbie, neoliberalism has made way for extraordinary advances for young women – not as a community, importantly, but as *individuals* who are able to succeed in education and the workplace, advance in their careers, and thus perceive themselves (and *all* women, by extension) as treated fairly and equally. This illusion of gender fairness and equity erases our ability, as individuals, to see problems that still linger in the bigger picture.

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey defines “neoliberalism” as the free-market-driven model of governance that “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (2). Under neoliberalism, the role of the state is to preserve these rights, markets and trade relationships above all else, valuing “market exchange as ‘an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action’” (3). Neoliberalism dictates that government gets “out of our

way,” leaving individuals free to earn money and advance their careers; these same individuals, supposedly, can then take care of their own – and then everyone, in theory, makes progress and feels better.

If this sounds familiar, it’s because neoliberalism has been the prevailing, often unquestioned, political ideology under globalization since at least the late 1970s. The neoliberal model is not new to the late twentieth century, but it became virtually unquestioned among Anglo-European democracies during the parallel leaderships of US president Ronald Reagan and UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, and it shaped the primary ideology of the UK’s “New Labour” movement under Tony Blair in the 1990s and early 2000s. In many countries today – and not just in those typically called “Western” – neoliberalism has come to seem normal, natural and thus not worth questioning; it’s just the way things *are*.

McRobbie takes the title of her important 2007 article on feminism’s relationship to neoliberalism, “Top Girls?,” from Caryl Churchill’s landmark 1982 play of the same name. In this play, one of the most important British feminist dramas of the twentieth century, main character Marlene wins a promotion to Managing Director at the “Top Girls” employment agency over her male peer, Howard. Marlene holds her own – and reveals a clear, though basic, feminist politics – in the second act when Howard’s wife appears to challenge her right, as a woman, to do the job; when time comes to support other women looking to move out of traditionally gendered jobs and into more challenging work, however, Marlene proves herself every bit as ruthless, and sexist, as