

Women's Theatre in America: A Historical Critical Study

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I

*The late afternoon sun makes islands
across the winter lawn
spots of time, I call them
somehow more intense
than the great swaths of summer.
The light enters me, filling dry wells
until I become my own sun.
My fifty years flare to corona
and I walk in a body of gold -
my nuptials to winter.
But I know I can't live on islands.
I must cross their blue borders
into the slashed eye of wind
and ululation of brown leaves.
Whatever I've conceived
must be born into this cold.
Women who choose islands
also choose the sea*

(Lucas 1992: 69)

The epigraph is meant to highlight the female literary landscape, a sense of contentment in the persona of being a woman and the richness of the woman's experience as felt/metaphorically expressed by a woman. Women experience, particularly in American theatre, this phase of the "island" and the "sea," the moment they choose to do theatre – one is singled out, and at the same time, one is able to be successful as a woman artist.

Women's entry into theatre and also their will to gain a place for themselves have transformed theatre into the new female bastion. This is a remarkable achievement since women in theatre were in a

disadvantageous position more than those in any other field viz., art, literature, etc. For theatre, especially in the Puritan West, was regarded as “Satan’s haunt” and the women in theatre obviously as “harlots” (Chinoy & Linda 1981: 3). Also, women involved in theatre were not invited into the key positions held by men, particularly in mainstream theatres like Broadway. In the early stages of American theatre women were mainly involved in acting, and a variety of other theatrical positions such as managing actress-daughters, ghostwriters of their husbands, casting agents and producers. In spite of the secondary position they occupied on the stage, and despite the suspicious outlook directed towards these “unsung” women, the history of the American theatre comprises of several women who, with their vital creative approach and reformative zeal, have managed to cause a significant dynamism to the staging/management of theatre.

The following account briefly traces the landscape of several female theatrical icons of America, from its beginnings in the colonial period till today. The word “landscape” reminds one of Gertrude Stein, the American-Jewish playwright, who called her plays “landscapes.” In keeping with her description of “landscapes,” the most significant slices of the women’s theatre landscape are chosen here in order to highlight these women’s significant achievement in the American theatre world. For this purpose a chronological history of women in American theatre in key positions (such as playwriting/directing/etc) is attempted here.

II

The beginnings of the American theatre in the 18th century witnessed conflicts between the colonies and the British crown, and hence the mood in theatre was one of revolutionary and propagandist zeal. The most important 18th century women in theatre, recognized by female historians as the ‘foremothers of the 20th century female stages’ (Keyssar 1984: 22) were Judith Sargent Stevens Murray (1751-1820) and Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1824). Judith Murray was the first native – born woman dramatist in colonial America to have her plays produced professionally. In her plays, she infused the revolutionary spirit particularly when theatre was the least popular. Murray’s *Virtue Triumphant* (1798) embodies the “self-assertive woman” very early in the dawn of America, and her *Traveller Returned* (1798) was basically revolutionary in tone. She was also the chief theorist of the republic of

womanhood (during the 1780's and 1790's). In her dramatic criticism in the 'The Gleaner: A Miscellaneous Production,' she criticized the commonwealth of Massachusetts for banning theatre performances in Boston until 1793 emphasizing the utility of theatre and the hard work involved in the career of an actor/actress.

For Mercy Otis Warren, the first American woman dramatist, theatre must be "more than 'amusement... prostituted to the purpose of vice'" (Chinoy & Linda 1981: 3). Taking over her brother's battle against the strict imposition of rules on the colonies by King George III, she used theatre as a tool for political purpose. Her most popular play *The Group* (1775) was an attack on the sixteen councilors appointed by the governor after the Boston Tea Party and the closure of the Boston harbor in December 1773.

The 19th century women's theatre noticed a general movement towards comedies with the mid-century witnessing the growth and fruition of very significant actresses. Playwrights like Anna Cora Mowatt (1819-1870) and Martha Morton (1865-1925) are noteworthy. Mowatt is known for her *Autobiography of an Actress* (1853) and her popular American social comedy in the fashion of *The School for Scandal*, called *Fashion or Life in New York* (1840). Morton, considered by many critics to be the most successful woman playwright, epitomizes the woman playwright as "reformer" gracing theatre with her "pure and blameless life" and with the "benign influence of a noble woman spirit" (Morton quoted by Chinoy & Linda 1981: 3). Yet Morton had to write initially under the pseudonym 'Henry Hazelton.' The 19th century was also noted for its talented actresses on stage, like Olive Logan, Julia Marlowe (Sarah Frances Frost 1866- 1950) and Mary Shaw, who had an idealistic vision of theatre. Mary Shaw, who along with Jessie Bonstelle (actress/stage-manager) projected the idea of a woman's National Theatre for the communication of "distinctive feminine feeling or opinions," viewed that drama, as the "Aristocrat of the arts and child of religion," is a "field for women" (p. 4). But such a projection of the national women's theatre had to wait till 20th century to become a reality.

III

More than the 18th or 19th centuries, 20th century increasingly evinced theatre as an accomplishment of the woman artist. As Eva Le

Galienne (1899-1991) actress-director of the Civic Repertory Theatre pointed out in 1931, modern theatre's development witnessed women as "doers," which can be seen from her observation of the artistic successes of Manchester's Miss Horniman, Ireland's Lady Gregory, New York's Irene and Alice Lewisohn, Mary Shaw and Minnie Madern Fiske. It is interesting to note that Le Galienne's remarks sprung as a protest against Gordon Craig's attack on women: "to achieve the reform of theatre, to bring it into the reform of theatre, to bring it into the condition necessary for it to become a fine art, women must have first left the boards" (Chinoy & Linda 1981: 4). The period that witnessed various historical events of the two World Wars and the agitation of the Women's Suffrage (1920's) etc, also saw the steady growth of women's theatre towards the focus on women characters and their problems faced as women.

The first half of the 20th century saw the emergence of women playwrights – like Rachel Crothers, Susan Glaspell, Glare Cumber, Alice Dunbar – Nelson, Mary Burrill, Lillian Hellman, Alice Childress, Zona Gale, Sophie Treadwell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Shirley Graham, Mary Chase - known as the "Precursors of the feminist drama." The 1920'-30's witnessed the Harlem Renaissance, with a number of African-American women playwrights on the rise. They were part of the nationwide Little Theatre Movement, which created amateur, community-based short performances at the same time as the Harlem Renaissance. These playwrights were Marita Bonner, Mary Burrill, Ottie Graham, Angelina Grimke, Dorothy C. Guinn, Francis Gunner, Maud Cuney Hare, Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, Myrtle Livingston Smith and Eulalie Spence.

Crothers was the first woman playwright to break social conventions in her portrayal of the 30-year old woman, rarely dramatised in American drama scene till then. The conflicting impulses in a woman, career and family, divorce, female independence etc. were some of the issues discussed in her plays like *The Three of Us* (1906), *He and She* (1911), *Let Us Be Gay* (1929), etc. Her contribution to the feminist theatre was immense in the sense that she culled out worn-out themes of woman, motherhood and family and saw them in a new perspective i.e. from a woman's point of view. Susan Glaspell's plays prefigure the "superwoman" protagonist, and suggest female bonding and intimacy. She portrays women who challenge patriarchal myths in her plays. Her most provocative play *The Verge* (1921) done at the Provincetown Players was a dramatic

extension of women's problems, where she assimilated and incorporated Strindberg, Ibsen, Shaw, Stanislavski and Reinhardt. Zona Gale's play *Ms. Lulu Bett* won the Pulitzer Prize for the best play in 1921. Mary Chase won the Pulitzer Prize in 1945 for her play *Harvey*. Ketti Frings won the same award in 1958 for her play *Look Homeward, Angel*.

The 1950's witnessed the emergence of the Off-Broadway, regional and institutional theatre, with more women entering the bastion of theatre. One has to specially take note of the emergence of the Black women in theatre. The Black women in theatre, especially "from Angelina Grimke to Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, and Adrienne Kennedy have, along with actresses and directors like Rose McClendon, Ruby Dee, and Vinnett Carroll, raised their voices to document and celebrate the 'life, experience and humor' of Black people" (Chinoy & Linda 1981: 7). Though Hansberry brought in stereotypical images of women in her plays, she is also noted for her play *The Children's Hour* (1934), which was a bold theatrical experience that brought to the fore the issue of lesbianism, so far kept in the dark. Women's theatre of the 1920's is also noted for a characteristic group of plays called "folk plays," which in its female rites, brought to light the lives of ordinary people "for whom the daily challenge is just to endure." It creates a secretive and tight women's world. The plays of Gale, Brown, Boyce and George D. Johnson belong to this category.

IV

The post-World War American theatre witnessed new roads of movement in woman's/feminist theatre. Other than women playwrights, the American theatre scene also witnessed the emergence of women's collective groups, formed sometimes on the ethnic lines or on the gender lines, with a purpose to do collaborative theatre and create multicultural understanding. The Spiderwoman Theatre is one such group formed by Native American women. While in the 1970s there were 40 women's theatre groups, by 1980s the number almost doubled. This shows the immense popularity that women's theatre groups enjoyed, with increased awareness by feminist movement.

Most of the post-World War women playwrights were born in the early 1930s and lived through the War years, and hence the impact of this experience is evident in their writings. There was also the rise of a

number of Black women playwrights from 1955 to 1967 as a result of the racial integration movement of the 1950s. The focus of the women's theatre was more on female characters and on feminist themes viz mother-daughter relationships, female bonding and sisterhood and sexuality. Most of these women, in keeping with their predecessors of the early decades, shunned Broadway with a dream to create a theatre, more profound than the commercial theatres, and also a theatre where art was valued more than finance.

One of the most important women dominating the pre/post-war theatre scene was Hallie Flanagan Davis who, with her unique style of directing classical plays to contemporary needs, was the first woman to be awarded with a Guggenheim fellowship and also to have secured the prestigious appointment as the national director of the Federal Theatre Project. In the aftermath of the World War II, there were many other women in the alternative theatre scene: Edith Isaacs with her manifold years as Editor of *Theatre Arts Journal*, Rosamond Gilder, Cheryl Crawford the cofounder with Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg of the Group Theatre, Margo Jones, Nina Vance (Houston Alley Theatre), Zelda Fichandler (Arena Stage), Judith Malina (Living Theatre), Ellen Stuart (La Mama), and Julia Miles (Women's Theater Project) were some of the "high priestesses" of women's theatre, who strongly believed in the 'collective and cumulative' art of theatre (Chinoy & Linda 1981: 5).

With the increasing mood (from the 1960s) for experimentation in the little, institutional art and alternative theatres off Broadway scene, women's strong influence in alternative theatre is observed. The feminists in theatre promoting their complete break with the masculine-oriented history of American drama could comfortably turn to the exploration of female experiences of life in a female-dominated world. Hence more and more all-women's theatre groups came to be established especially from the 1970's when collective/ensemble theatre companies made plays. These feminist theatre groups followed the idea of non-authoritarianism in keeping with the principle that no leader/director headed the group. Emphasis was made on the following features: use of rituals and theatre games for consciousness-raising; flouting of conventional make up/costumes; personalized settings; theatre as a space for the display of works by talented women and also for employment of female artists; techniques meant to attack conventional norms of femininity and basic gender-role assumptions/demands; theatre as a public arena for the collective sharing of personal experiences. The Woman Space Theatre and

Interart Theatre (New York); the Washington Area Feminist Theatre and Circle of the Witch (Minneapolis), "It's Alright to be a Woman" group – all established in the 1970's – the recent WOW Cafe and Spiderwoman are some of the women's theatre groups that have done excellent collective theatre.

There was also a host of women playwrights in key positions in the off-off-Broadway theatres. The post war theatre from the 1970's marks the emergence of the female playwright-director, with more and more women playwrights turning to direction mostly because of the equal opportunity of theater training made available in the off-Broadway environment and also because of the women's dissatisfaction towards male directing of woman's plays. The 1960s decentralisation of Broadway, once the "Mecca of all American Playwrights," became a reality with the formation of alternative theatres, Theatre Councils, Women's Theatre projects, etc. These led to the emergence of a network of women playwrights. In the 1970s this was strengthened further with the founding of the Woman's Theater Council comprising of six women playwrights and with this council later evolving into New York Theater Strategy with twenty three playwrights including male playwrights like Ed Bullins, Sam Shepard, John Ford Noonan, etc. Alice Childress, Megan Terry, Myrna Lamb, Adrienne Kennedy, Maria Irene Fornes, Rochelle Owens, Beth Henley, Marsha Norman, Emily Mann, JoAnne Akalaitis, Elizabeth LeCompte, Tina Howe, Ntozake Shange, Paula Vogel, Karen Finley, Susan Lori Parks, Anna Deavere Smith, Martha Boesing, Lisa Loomer, Anne Meara, Rita Dove, etc, are some of the important women dramaturges.

Alice Childress was the first Black American woman playwright to have produced her work at off-Broadway, thereby paving the way for other fellow playwrights. In Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969), women's theatre finds its shift from the hesitant heroine to an assertive, sexual and strongly rebellious female protagonist. Attention to both racial as well as female consciousness is also a feature in her plays. Megan Terry, known as the "Mother of American Feminist Drama" (Keyssar 1984: 53), prepared off-Broadway for feminist oriented gender deconstructions through her transformational plays. In these plays, she shifted the actors frequently and suddenly from one role/character/situation/time/objective to another, thereby liberating the actor from the fixed perspective of his/her role. Such a transformational style was helpful to challenge, neutralise and also

dismantle female stereotypes, and at the same helped deconstruct the then existing realistic theatre modes.

With 1960s and 1970s American theatre scene that gets flooded with women writers like Megan Terry, Rochelle Owens, Adrienne Kennedy and Maria Irene Fornes, and here one witnesses the change of approach in American women's theatre i.e., from a male to a female one. The emergence of the feminist theatre movement resulted in the growth and development of lesbian theatre groups like, Red Dyke (Atlanta), Lavender Cellar (Minneapolis), Lesbian – Feminist Theatre Collective (Pittsburg). The formation of the Women's Theatre Council in 1972 and the Women Theatre Project in 1978 were major events that helped promote women's theatre in the USA. Unlike earlier women artists who created images of women, the women playwrights of these two decades manifest a re-visioning of the theatrical form itself. For an instance, Megan Terry's concept of community problem plays shows how women's theatrical form takes a new course. Megan Terry, who won several Obie awards, earned the name "mother of American feminist drama." Her work with Omaha Magic Theatre, where she worked on community problem play and social action dramas, is remarkable.

Adrienne Kennedy explores the Black woman psyche in the Strindberg – like world that makes her plays, "complex, surrealist psychodramas." Her most significant play *Funny House of a Negro* (1964) explores the fragmented psyche of the female mulatto, a metaphor for the black woman's alienation from her gender and race.

Maria Irene Fornes is one dramaturge who has won nine Obie awards, the highest number of Obie awards next only to Beckett, Stoppard and Breur. Her theatrical career that began in the 1960s has sustained itself in multiple forms in her role as a painter, playwright, dramatist, costume designer, playwriting workshop writer, who has nurtured in her workshops several of America's leading Hispanic-American writers. Dissatisfied with a production of *Molly's Dream*, her first play that centers woman in an Absurd experience, she started directing the premier production of all her plays. Fornes is an able and well known director of her own plays as well as drama classics like Ibsen, Chekhov, Calderon, and others. Though criticized for investing the Cuban experience in her plays, a close reading of her texts reveal a cross-cultural current in most of her works, which she never spells out, but is always there. Despite these criticisms, her work of mentoring latino writers at the Hispanic Playwrights Lab that she set up at INTAR (International Arts Relations), from 1981 to 1991. Many of

the leading Latino writers like Cherrie Morrago, Eduardo Machado, Milcha Sanchez Scott, Migdalia Cruz, and Nilo Cruz (who won Pulitzer Prize in 2003) emerged as successful playwrights from this Hispanic Arts Center in New York City. *Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama* sums up Fornes' merit as a dramaturge in the following words: "Overall, Fornes can be regarded as an artist who uses pinpoint simplicity to convey emotional complexity, finds beauty in the filth of human experience, and brilliantly employs Brechtian techniques, ENVIRONMENTAL THEATER, found objects, ABSURDISM, and other elements in order to crystallize her idea of theatrical performance" (Cody & Sprinchom 2001: 468).

Rochelle Owens uses a play of grotesque within a feminist critique of social institutions. She creates a theatre of cruelty with a language that is replete with dreams and erotic perversions, thereby perceiving violence in human behaviour. A good instance of this feature is her play *Futz*, which Harold Clurman calls as "Anthropology of Fantasy," (quoted by Keyssar 1984: 113), where grotesque image of Cy Futz making love to his pig Amanda is presented. Myrna Lamb, like Owens, in her 1970's play, *But What Have You Done for me Lately?* creates shocking sensations with a pregnant man pleading for abortion to a female doctor. Her use of "role reversal" and parallel montage are "innovations in technique" that are increasing in today's women's theatre. Violence as theme, a general trend of the post-war theatre, is given a woman's interpretation here.

The vision of female assertiveness and female bonding as alternatives to self destruction and also the picture of females in the mood of seclusion and suicide are derived from the 1980's playwrights like Beth Henley and Marsha Norman. Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1981) that won the Pulitzer Prize appeals for strong sisterhoods and is feminist in vision. Norman's *night, Mother* (1983), the biggest hit of the '80's, deals with the secluded life of a mother and a daughter, the latter elaborately preparing the former more than herself towards her suicide. Setting plays an important role in both *Crimes* and *Mother*, in its suggestion of the intimate female theatre space facilitating female bonding.

V

The 1990's phenomenon of the proliferating number of women – not merely in acting, or stage management, but in key positions as playwright/director/artistic director heading both national and regional

theatres – raises several questions whether this phenomenon of “gender shift” is the result of the modern feminist movement; or whether men are emptied of talents and needed to be replaced by women; or whether the modern women’s theatre is regaining its glory of the early 20th century when it was guided by “several key directors” called as “instrumental visionaries and creating ‘matriarchs’ in the earliest stages of the nation’s regional theatre movement” (Berson 1994: 16). All these assumptions put together are true. For the women’s movement has certainly contributed to the awareness and scrutiny of women’s role in theatre.

With men in nonprofit theatres making their way more and more toward commercial theatres, their positions are open to women directors who are fresh and new to experimentation and also ready to face the challenge. Megan Terry remarks that women’s “historical role has been to clean up the mess” (Berson 1994: 18). Or as Emily Mann puts it, “it’s our role now to bring new life, new optimism and sanity back into these theatres, where it’s really needed” (p. 19). Whether it is Emily Mann (who has made it to the top as artistic director of the McCarter Theatre, or JoAnne Akalaitis (former artistic director of the New York Shakespeare Festival) or Elizabeth LeCompte or Maria Irene Fornes, or Rita Dove (Poet laureate of the US, 1993-95), or Paula Vogel (winner of Pulitzer Prize of 1998 for the play *How I Learned to Drive*), North America finds now women at the top rung of the theatrical ladder. In the playwriting scene too a host of avant-garde women playwrights from various ethnic backgrounds abound in the American stage: Maria Irene Fornes, Joyce Carol Oates, Tina Howe, Karen Malpede, Susan-Lori Parks, Joan M. Schenkar, Luna Tarlo and Jules Aaron, Ntozake Shange, Adrienne Kennedy, Rosalyn Drexler, Dolores Prida, Milcha Sanchez-Scott, Wendy Wasserstein, Migdalia Cruz, Paula Vogel. Wendy Wasserstein became the first woman playwright to win the Tony Award. The 1990s decade also began the establishment of ARTNOW, a grassroots demonstration for the arts and arts funding in 1998, which started a new trend in theatre in America, of going beyond ethnicity and class distinction and reaching out to global sisterhoods.

The mushrooming of feminists plays in the radical era of the 1970s is not seen so much today. Only the Spiderwoman’s theater and At the Foot of the Mountain theatre that began in 1970s are visible today. Split Britches that opened shop as a lesbian theatre now continues its work in woman’s solo performances. Some of the companies that continue to develop women’s works are the Pleiades

Theatre Company (est. in 1995), at Louisville, Kentucky, New Georges Theatre of New York City, which continue to develop women's theatre work. Similarly the Magadalena Project (Est. 1986) is an international women's theatre network with 50 member countries. However it is the individual playwrights, who through their successful plays are redefining how women's/feminist theatre is looked at in the 21st century. Playwrights like Paula Vogel and Susan Lori Parks "...abandon domestic realism to explore a wider canvas of social issues in concerns in plays with fractured narratives and theatrically imaginative uses of time and metaphor, language and imagery" (Dolan 2007: 257). While directors like Anne Bogart and Tina Landau brought recognition to the female director's theatrical production, performers like Cherry Jones, who won a Tony award, brought visibility to the female actor.

While exploring new female archetypes in theatre these women also reflect a global concern to women in particular and humanity in general. What Caryl Churchill mentions of playwriting deserves to be quoted here: "Playwriting will change not because more women are doing it but because more women are doing other things as well." (quoted by Berson 1994 20). Those "other things" could be traced in the following: the subversion of male-created female stereotypes, attempt at enlarging the female types, and above all the struggle to transform women's theatre into a universal unit, as a free/dominant, challengingly individualistic and a unique phenomenon transcending the male theatre. Certainly today's American women's theatre with its talented dramaturges strikes a promising note:

These women do not necessarily speak the same language, but all of them belong to a family of minds... These American women from diverse social backgrounds and ethnicities clearly transcend simple distinctions of class and race in their desire to give voice to deep, subtle feelings and thoughts. For the most part, they have shunned commercial success in favor of a noble commitment. Thanks to these courageous, creative women, America is becoming a world leader in truly contemporary dramaturgy. (Lamont 1993: viii)

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