

Preface: Transformations

significantly to what I say about the plays themselves. A brief list of those that inform these pages would include the works of Nancy Choderow, Dorothy Dinerstein, Juliet Mitchell, Carol Gilligan, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Sheila Rowbotham and Catherine A. MacKinnon. Another kind of context that frames this book is the University of California Feminist Theater and Video Ensemble, whose diverse and generous members gave new life to some of these plays. Equally generous in their support of my work have been members of the Communication Department staff: I thank C. Jane Geddes who gave particular help at key moments and I especially thank Lynn Lindsey and Jillaine Smith, who worked patiently and with wonderful efficiency on the preparation of the final typescript. Jillaine Smith was a member of the first UCSD Feminist Theater Ensemble and knew just how and why this manuscript mattered. The Regents of the University of California supported my research with a grant that enabled me to interview playwrights, see productions and gather material in the United States and England. Bruce and Adele King, the series editors, prodded me long distance in just the right ways and did a fine and fast job of editing at the end of this enterprise; I especially appreciate their rigorous reading of Chapter 8. Finally, there is my own less public context, repeatedly enriched and transformed by Tracy B. Strong, Catherine Portuges and Carol Axel, each of whom has shared with me the experience of renewal that feminist drama can bring.

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1 Roots and Contexts

Feminist drama emerged as a distinct theatrical genre in the late 1960s in both Britain and the United States. Although plays about women have existed since the origins of drama, and plays by women have been written and performed in the Western world at least since Sappho, it was not until the last decade that playwrights in significant numbers became self-consciously concerned about the presence – or absence – of women as women on stage. Parented by the women's movement and the 'new theatre', feminist drama had its most immediate roots in the political and aesthetic disruptions of the 1960s. As the contemporary playwright Honor Moore has remarked, whether or not they identify themselves publicly and politically as 'feminists', there are now playwrights whose 'art is related to their condition as women'.¹ The plays created in the context of that recognition do not just mirror social change but assert a new aesthetic based on the transformation rather than the recognition of persons.

Gertrude Stein, whose operas and scores for the theatre

in the first half of the century were among the first overtly feminist dramas, described her plays as 'landscapes'. Her works were indeed terrains for playing, not slices of reality but segments or visions of the world crammed with nuance, with shadow and light, and deliberately left fluid for performance. The concept of a play as a landscape, while de-emphasising the plot, usefully embodies the importance of texture and detail in feminist drama. Important, too, to the notion of feminist drama as landscapes is the diffusion of the playwright's attention among a number of characters. 'After all,' Stein remarked, 'to me one human being is as important as another human being, and you might say that the landscape has the same values, a blade of grass has the same value as a tree.'² In contrast to much Western drama, characters in feminist plays only rarely transcend their contexts; more frequently, they grapple with and attempt to reorder the ordinary activities of everyday life. Feminist playwrights often behave like explorers, sending back maps for their audiences of apparent but uncharted territories. The lands and cities they reveal are not remote or exotic; they are the places of women, and they have been there all along. Only now, however, they are being discovered and illuminated.

The characters who inhabit these landscapes are usually but not exclusively women. A number of the most effective plays in the genre do banish men from the stage world; in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* or Pam Gems's *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* men are only present in references in the women's conversations and the absence of men on stage itself becomes a forceful gesture. But the absence of men as well as the particular roles created for men in feminist plays are rarely simple matters of revenge or rectification. To the surprise of many spectators, few feminist dramas are

primarily assaults on men. More frequently, feminist plays attempt to pay attention to the lives of women – as individuals, in relation to each other, and in relation to men.

This often takes the form, closely associated with other aspects of the women's movement, of re-presenting women who played important but forgotten roles in history or of retelling history from a female perspective. Plays like Viveca Lanfors's *I Am Woman* and Eve Merriam's *Out of Our Father's House* use the stage both to inform the audience of the deeds and struggles of women who altered history and to sound the cry of women's voices, to break the silence too often characteristic of women's place in drama. More recently, some of the most powerful feminist dramas have captured moments in history from strikingly distinctive angles of vision: Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* and *Cloud Nine* and Wendy Kesselman's *My Sister in this House*, for example, present perspectives on history that emphasise women's social roles as defined by their sexuality. In re-presenting history, these plays call into question conventional notions and theatrical expressions of sexuality and relationships of power to gender.

While not all feminist dramas are overtly concerned with power and politics, taken together these plays present an overwhelming argument for the inseparability of sexuality and gender from politics. Equally important, many of these plays exploit the very nature of theatre to demonstrate the distinction between gender and sexuality. It is not in biologically defined sexual identity but in social gender roles that power is allocated and enacted on stage. In the theatre, the actor is able to take on *any* identity or character role. Audiences for ancient Greek drama, for the Elizabethan theatre, for classic Chinese opera, not only accepted the playing of female characters by men, but

assumed the actor's ability to take on many roles, both male and female. Transformations of gender and the variability of roles in contexts have thus always been implicit components of theatre. Plays like Eve Merriam's *The Club*, Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* and Megan Terry's *Hothouse*, pay attention to this inherent possibility of theatre by requiring the performance of male characters by women and female characters by men and by only partially disguising these transformations. Other feminist dramas, like Myrna Lamb's *But What Have You Done for Me Lately?* or Megan Terry's *Comings and Goings* create worlds in which men engage in traditionally 'female' activities. Such gestures free the stage for a fuller, more complex exploration of erotic and social behaviour among all human beings and make gender transformations political.

The relationship of theatre to audience always conjoins and juxtaposes private life and public life, but except in Greek tragedy where the chorus rendered the private public, the spectator has been the unseen voyeur of the character's most private moments. And even in Greek drama, the stance of the playwright was to be distant or invisible. In contrast, a significant number of feminist playwrights and performers have consciously drawn on their own lives for the stories and characters that structure their plays, and, rather than attempting to disguise this autobiographical tendency, have proclaimed it as an important assertion of presence. In the past, when women have been allowed to speak or appear in public it has been in *disguise*, hidden behind make-up, veils, deceptive clothing, carefully regulated movement, names that obliterate their own identities or make them tangential to a man. It is therefore appropriate that one radical gesture of feminist theatre is to decrease the distance between playwright and

actress, actress and character, to build without distortion or protection the stories told on stage from the experiences of those who make theatre. Theatrical and personal vulnerability are thus asserted rather than hidden. In a frequently cited statement of this tenet, the New York feminist theatre company, It's All Right to Be Woman articulated this approach:

We make theatre out of our lives, our dreams, our feelings, our fantasies. We make theatre by letting out the different parts of us that we have pushed inside all our lives. . . . Making theatre out of these private parts of ourselves is one way we are trying every day to take our own experiences seriously, to accept our feelings as valid and real.³

The obvious danger in this emphasis on the personal, confessional resources of feminist drama is that it becomes too idiosyncratic or simply too constrained by the particular life experiences of a few playwrights. One way feminist drama tries to avoid this obstacle is by collective scripting of various kinds. Feminist theatre companies in both Britain and the United States have often created their own scripts for performance, and, rather than assigning the task of playwrighting to one member, they have frequently arrived at scripts through the collaboration of everyone involved. In Britain during the seventies and early eighties, the Women's Theatre Group, Red Ladder Theatre, Gay Sweatshop, Joint Stock, and Monstrous Regiment each produced collectively devised feminist productions. Beginning somewhat earlier, in the late sixties, the Rhode Island Feminist Theatre, It's All Right to Be a Woman, Circle of the Witch, the New Feminist Theatre, the New York Feminist Theatre Troupe, Caravan Theatre, the Alive and

Trucking Theatre Company, the Omaha Magic Theatre and at least a dozen other women's theatre groups performed collectively created works in the United States. Most of these companies followed a similar process: out of discussions of their own life-experiences, the group would arrive at a theme or set of related motifs – mother-daughter relationships, abortion and work were among those frequently pursued – and then a smaller group would work out a structure for the show. After further discussion, the company would spend considerable time in games and improvisations to explore theatrically the stories they had shared; relatively late in the process, specific roles would be taken on and a script would be recorded.⁴ This mode of scripting often results in what Honor Moore has called 'choral plays', dramas that focus on groups of women rather than on one female protagonist. By presenting a variety of equal voices, these plays structurally avoid enclosure in one point of view.

Such full-scale collective scripting continues, but other modes of collaboration have tended to replace the company script. The reasons are varied. Many of these scripts are contextually bound to parochial issues and individual histories; they are exhaustive of time, money and energy. In addition, there is still sufficient resistance to any kind of collective work that neither producers nor publishers are eager to support plays that cannot be identified with a 'unique' individual. The notion prevails that originality is an individual attribute and is tainted by dialogue with others.

In response to these obstacles, some companies have simply modified the concept of the script subcommittee such that responsibility for scripting shifts from one member to another or is taken on by one or two participants who are particularly skilled as playwrights. More frequently, women engaged in playwriting will be com-

missioned by a theatre or company to work with the players and director to develop a script. Pam Gems, Michelene Wandor and Caryl Churchill have all worked in this way in Britain, as have Susan Miller, Megan Terry and Myrna Lamb among others in the United States. Still other playwrights like Ntozake Shange and Paula Moss, Eve Merriam, Paula Wagner and Jack Hoffsiss, Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden have created their scripts jointly with other writers.

Still another, more severe attempt to minimise the coercion of written words has appeared in the creation of deliberately skeletal or flexible scripts that necessitate or allow a second stage of writing. Texts like Susan Miller's *Cross Country* or Viveca Lanfors's *I Am Woman* provide sufficient structure and language for a company to begin work while leaving many specific dramaturgical and performance decisions to each particular troupe. The playwrights present the material on the page in ways that urge the performers to renegotiate, to cut and add. On the page, Miller's work looks like a collage of prose and dialogue; the actors and director must give dramatic form to *Cross Country*. Lanfors's play allows for roles to be performed by any number of participants and provides for the easy substitution of speeches, voices and characters. Like other modes of collaboration these, too, are part of the feminist resistance to hierarchy and authoritarian control.

These efforts have not, of course, sprung whole from the new feminism of the last two decades but are rooted in the ensemble concept initially articulated around 1830 by the Russian writer Gogol and his associate, the actor Shchepkin. Gogol and Shchepkin urged theatrical production to rid itself of its adulation of stars and instead aim for the subordination of individual performances to the overall effect of the performed drama. Stanislavsky was much

influenced by the directions taken by Gogol and Shchepkin, and, in his own work with the Moscow Art Theatre, made the ensemble a *sine qua non* of good rehearsal process: 'What is important to me,' he wrote, 'is that the collective creation of all the artists of the stage be whole and complete and that all those who helped to make the performance might serve for the sake of the same creative goal and bring their creations to one common denominator.'⁵

It is possible to argue that the realisation of that dictum became the driving force behind every significant theatre performance since the turn of the century. But although Stanislavsky included 'all the artists of the stage' in his concept of 'collective creation', he did not confront the fact that as long as men and women remained unequal in society and in the scripts that reflected the social world, authentic collectivity was impossible.

It was not until the 1950s when a resurgence of experimentation in the theatre brought renewed energy to the ensemble concept, that concern with the structure of theatrical production began to make conscious links to women's roles. In Britain, Joan Littlewood directed and inspired the Theatre Workshop which produced both innovative revivals of classical works and new plays, of which the most notable were those of Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney. The Theatre Workshop combined a commitment to social change with serious attempts to organise its own procedures in a collective fashion; Littlewood herself persistently objected to the acclaim she received for the success of the company's productions on the grounds that the strength of the Workshop's productions lay in the 'hard-won ability of its actors to work self-effacingly as a team'.⁶

Ironically, one of the aspects of the Workshop that was

most disconcerting to reviewers was its acknowledged involvement in the shaping of new scripts. Utilising a method that was to become central to companies in the sixties and crucial to the emergence of feminist drama, the Workshop actors improvised from scripted materials, and these improvisations in turn transformed the script. With curiosity and some suspicion, critics and audiences perceived these rehearsal procedures and the choice of plays as 'female-dominated'.

In 1956, another new company, the English Stage Society, made its first appearance at the Royal Court Theatre, under the director George Devine. Committed to the production of new plays and open to work that called attention to class consciousness, the English Stage Society at the Royal Court sought to transform the British theatre from the museum showcase it had become by the mid-fifties into an innovative and socially influential activity. Yet, in its search for new playwrights, the only woman it 'discovered' was Ann Jellicoe, and although the plays it produced were concerned with socially 'relevant' topics, few of them presented any significant challenge to the class or gender structure of the worlds they portrayed.

During this period, the seeds of the 'new theatre' in the United States were planted by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, founders in 1946 of the Living Theatre. Malina's and Beck's first concern was to create a theatre supportive of poetic drama, a theatre that encouraged poets to write plays and that rejected the living-room realism of most mainstream theatre. Over the next twenty years, including periods of significant economic and ideological disruption, the Living Theatre brought new and unproduced dramas to the stage and was a centre for experimentation in theatrical styles. In the early fifties, it was one of the few companies to produce the plays of Gertrude Stein.

From the womb of the Living Theatre sprang the American experimental theatre of the sixties. Joseph Chaikin, originally an actor with the Living Theatre, founded the Open Theatre in 1963 to seek new theatrical forms and new rehearsal techniques. Writers and directors, among them Megan Terry and Roberta Sklar, were included in the extensive games and exercises developed by the Open Theatre from Viola Spolin's theatre games and Jerzy Grotowski's work with the Polish Laboratory Theatre. As the Open Theatre developed, it increasingly stressed 'sound-and-movement' exercises that coordinated physical and oral gestures independent of semantic or representational content. The Performance Group, the Manhattan Project, the Theater of the Ridiculous, and other new companies like the Caravan Theatre in Boston and the San Francisco Mime Troupe followed similar but distinguishable paths to that of the Open Theatre, most-often creating scores that necessitated improvisation in performance as well as in the rehearsal process.

Much of this experimentation, particularly when it meant the production of new scripts by unknown playwrights or collaborations, was nourished by one extraordinary woman, Ellen Stewart, who, in 1961 established her Café La Mama in a basement in the East Village of New York City. Stewart's focus, like that of the English Stage Society, was on the discovery of new drama; more relentlessly than any other theatre artist of the time, she searched for plays that had little resemblance to living-room dramas.

Improvisation, process, environment, transformation and audience-relationship were the keywords of these companies and theatres, all of which saw themselves in rebellion against what Peter Brook proclaimed as the 'dead theatre' of Broadway, the West End and the like. As the

names of many of these companies, including the Theatre Workshop, suggest, the goal was a theatre that exploded the barrier between art and life. Performances were viewed in a continuum with rehearsals, the stage as an isolated platform was abandoned, actors took on multiple roles, often transforming identity from one character to another in full view of the audience. The use of transformations as a technique and concept whereby actions, objects and characters were fluidly altered from one identity to another soon revealed a device that could be exploited to explore sex-based roles.

It was in this 'new theatre' in the United States that lines purposefully began to be blurred between the actor as a person with a life-history outside the theatre and the actor-as-character: towards the end of the Open Theatre's *Mutation Show*, one of the women in the company, Ellen Maddow, introduced herself and her co-performers to the audience, announcing not only their 'real' names but providing genealogies and bits of descriptions that remarked something of each performer's context outside the theatre. The personal was half-consciously becoming political.

Feminist drama is indebted to these experiments yet none of them significantly altered the domination of contemporary drama by men and by an imbedded masculine vision of the world. One hindrance to change was the cult of personality that inspired and bound most of the new theatre companies. Despite the important presences of Joan Littlewood, Roberta Sklar, and Ellen Stewart, and in part because of the attempts of these women to undermine their own roles as charismatic leaders, most of the new theatre experiments were dominated by and identified with particular men. George Devine, Michel Saint-Denis, Peter Cheeseman, Peter Brook, Peter Hall, Joseph Chaikin,

Richard Schechner and Andre Gregory were the names that emerged in the public sphere as the leaders of the new theatre of the sixties. And with Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee leading the way, it was again male playwrights who led the published lists of the major new playwrights of the era. Ann Jellicoe, Shelagh Delaney, Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy, Rochelle Owens, Maria Irene Fornes, Megan Terry and Rosalyn Drexler all wrote award-winning plays during the late fifties and sixties, but while drama courses and anthologies quickly absorbed the new male playwrights, their female counterparts remained obscure.

The 'new' theatre simultaneously revealed and barricaded the way for women in theatre. At the same time, the political movements of the sixties, especially in the United States, were unknowingly running a parallel course. Beginning in the early sixties, significant numbers of American women, most of them young and middle class, forsook the shelter of suburban domesticity and threw their energies into the civil rights movement, the student movement and the anti-war movement. They taught in freedom schools, ran voter registration projects, set up libraries, rode buses across the South; in disproportionate numbers, these women stuffed envelopes and kept the offices of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Committee on Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Committee (SCLC), and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) running – and clean. On freedom rides and marches, they were threatened, assaulted and not infrequently arrested and jailed. Women in these movements embraced the 'new left' emphasis on community and challenged bourgeois family structure along with racism, poverty, imperialism and nuclear armament. They supported the anti-bureaucratic,

non-hierarchical structures that were to keep the people involved in the movement. In particular, many American women, early on, saw in the model of black power an opportunity to challenge and change sexual inequality in their personal and social lives. Armed with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1962), the pill and a new self-confidence gained through political work, women began to question their own investments in sexual monogamy, economic dependency and public impotence.

The parallels between the activities and ideals of American new theatre artists and new left workers are striking. Both movements placed high value on collective activity, striving for an authentic sense of community within the group as well as a deep engagement with the audience or community they served. The notion borrowed from Jerzy Grotowski of a 'poor theatre', a theatre stripped of ornament and focused on the elemental and transcendent possibilities of the actor, had its equivalent in the new left emphasis on action – on sit-ins and door-to-door registration – and in the evolving counter-cultural lifestyle. Both movements challenged the authority and authorities of established institutions; although Americans in the sixties rarely voiced their concerns in terms of class conflict or class consciousness, poverty became an issue inseparable from racism, the elitism of academic institutions and the war in Vietnam. Underlying both the new theatre and the new politics was an impassioned rejection of complacency and a somewhat romantic vision of personal and social transformation: taking risks became good in itself and to be vulnerable was paradoxically to be strong.

For many women involved in the American political movements the romance was short lived. By 1965, a number of women, particularly white women involved in the civil rights movement, were beginning to rebel against

their own relative powerlessness. Discrepancies between the rhetoric of political equality and practice when it came to women had taken its toll. In a paper indicting gender-based discrimination in SNCC, Casey Hayden and Mary Varela claimed that although women kept the movement running on a day-to-day basis, they had little say in policy decisions.⁷ Other women were noting that almost all of the position papers put out by movement organisations appeared under the names of men, even when women had contributed significantly to their authorship. Equally disturbing to many women was the exploitation of their attempts to rethink personal relationships in the context of movement politics. Remarks like Stokely Carmichael's notorious 'The only position for women in SNCC is prone', infuriated women and brought their confusion about sexual behaviour to the fore. In political gatherings as well as in theatre companies, sexual diversity became a sign of liberation, but for many women freedom from the constraints of traditional sexual mores quickly became an objectifying dogma.

Between 1965 and 1968, the growing self-consciousness of American women outside as well as within the 'movement' appeared in the public sphere. In 1965, a group of professional women, many of whom had been involved in state commissions on the status of women, founded the National Organisation of Women (NOW); their initial aim was to lobby for the civil and economic rights of women in education, work and media representation. As student protests and anti-war activities accelerated in 1966 and 1967, women began to protest against male definitions of work and the abstract, impersonal style of movement rhetoric. By late 1967 women's liberation groups had formed in Chicago, New York, Boston and Toronto. The forerunners of consciousness-raising circles, most of these

early women's groups were formed spontaneously by women who found themselves in long conversations about their roots and frustrations in civil rights or student movement organisations. Within a year, thousands of women were meeting in small groups all over the United States. Their goal was to raise each other's consciousness of the plight of women by sharing stories of oppression and private struggle for autonomy and self-confidence. These were, as they came to be called, support groups, gatherings of women who had wished to support each other's struggle for self-respect.

Once the women's movement erupted in the United States, it was only a matter of months before its resonances were heard in Britain and before women in the theatre in both countries recognised the potential for a new feminist theatre. In the absence of a coherent civil rights movement and in the presence of a significantly more structured and overtly socialist left-wing movement, women in England were a step behind American women in both articulating their distinct concerns and forming into separate groups to confront feminist issues. Yet legislation that affected women was and has remained more progressive in Britain than in the United States: while sixties civil rights laws cleared some paths for women in the United States, the legality of abortion was left to the courts, reforms in divorce laws occurred slowly at the state level, and the Equal Rights Amendment was defeated in 1982. In contrast, in Britain both an Abortion Act and an act partially legalising male homosexuality were passed in 1967, a Divorce Reform Act was passed in 1969 and the Equal Pay Act of 1970 set the legal path for a gradual rectification of women's economic status.

For women in both countries the key to a distinct women's movement was in the acceptance of the notion

that 'the personal is political'. The challenge in that slogan was significantly different for American women than for their British sisters. For Americans, most of the sixties was spent in becoming politically conscious, in recognising that women could indeed take on political roles. Because the politics in which American women in the sixties were nurtured had ostensibly stressed the fusion of personal and political life, once American women accepted and desired political roles, there was no difficulty in acknowledging that 'the personal is political'; that, in turn, meant that politics had to deal with gender. But while it was relatively easy by the late sixties for American women to place their psychological struggles in the context of politics, it was and is still difficult for Americans to consider class conflict as central to politics and to their particular concerns as women. For women in Britain, however, the framework of politics was class structure, and at least one obstacle in the women's movement was a clear understanding of the relationship between gender conflict and class conflict.

Significant numbers of women in Britain had been active on the 'New Left' and/or members of the Communist Party, the Committee for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the Labour Party Young Socialists, the International Socialism Group (IS), tenants' associations, trade unions and community workshops. Rather than gradually becoming politicised, these women had struggled through internal disputes on the left that focused on the necessary confrontation with Stalinism after 1956. While American women who barely knew the name Leon Trotsky were desegregating restaurants and public transportation, British women were running free schools and community workshops but were also arguing the relevance of Lenin's doctrines to the problems of inequality in Britain in the sixties. The American women who moved from civil rights work into

the student movement or the anti-war movement tended to be white women who found their racial identity (especially when coupled with their sexual identity) to be an increasing obstacle to useful work. In Britain, however, many women moved from one 'New Left' group to another because of changes in their conscious political perceptions: some women switched from local community-oriented groups to national or international party organisations, and others moved in the opposite direction out of a similar desire to have more impact on social change. Unknown to each other, however, women in both countries were struggling with common issues: the failure of political groups to reorganise their own structures so as to undermine a psychology of leadership, the resistance of most groups to genuine consideration of the political meanings of the ways people lived their ordinary lives, and the persistent subordination of women to men.

It is still difficult to sort out the interrelationships of the political and cultural explosions that occurred world-wide in 1968. What is clear is that students, in some instances with workers, dramatised their dissatisfaction not just with governments but with the fabric of daily life. The public demonstrations of 1968 were undeniably theatrical, made more so perhaps by the ability of television and radio to transmit dramatic visual images to a vast public. In the United States particularly, theatre and politics were haunting bedfellows as millions of spectators witnessed assassinations as well as strikes and protest marches on their television sets. When, in the autumn of 1968, a number of women's groups produced a theatrical protest using street-theatre conventions against the sexism of the Miss America pageant, it was an event coherent with the collusion of theatre and politics in other corners of society. It was also, however, the first instance in which the resurgent women's

movement had achieved significant public acknowledgement. Two years later, women in Britain would protest against the Miss World event in a similar theatrical demonstration. Feminist theatre had been born.

It now needed to discover and rediscover the scripts that would make it endure, and that endeavour faced two immediate obstacles. The first was obvious: as Virginia Woolf had made poignantly clear forty years before in *A Room of One's Own*, the social structure in which theatre has existed for more than 2000 years made it unlikely that a 'Judith Shakespeare', talented as we might imagine her, would achieve recognition as a playwright. And, although a number of women playwrights had seen their works published and produced in the twentieth century, even in the late 1960s the networks of money and power that brought drama to the public remained not only primarily controlled by men but intimidatingly impenetrable for most women.

Equally important, even once the women's movement and feminist theatre had begun to assert their presence, many feminist playwrights deliberately resisted definition of the genre. Particularly in its early stages, some practitioners felt that to define the genre was to place inappropriate constraints on a form that aimed at diversification. To avoid the simple replacement of one elite and compound voice with another, it was argued that no individual voice should bear the *authority* of definition. It was not that this voice was necessarily wrong or corrupt, unimaginative or even unrepresentative of the group as a whole, but that it carried power that no other individual or group as a whole could equal. The Polish Laboratory Theatre was defined by Grotowski; Peter Brook articulated the goals of theatrical innovation in England; despite the recognised contributions of prominent colleagues, Joseph Chaikin spoke for

the Open Theatre. In order to escape this domination and the hierarchical structure it implied, a number of women left established theatre companies, including ones that were self-consciously experimental or political. In 1972, when Charlotte Rea was researching an article on women's theatre groups for *The Drama Review*, she found that in order to report on one group's activities, she had to meet with everyone who was available and that 'when it became necessary to have the material checked for accuracy, the whole group was consulted'.⁸ Micheline Wandor's research on feminist theatre groups in Britain revealed a similar commitment, as was directly stated by the Women's Theatre Group: 'our group, as a byproduct of the Women's Movement, has already functioned in a totally collective manner, trying to avoid leadership and hierarchies'.⁹

A second reason that playwrights resist or disclaim definitions of feminist drama is their hesitancy to be associated with feminism as a social and political movement. Some deny the existence of a distinct feminine sensibility and claim that when they focus on women, or reveal gender as a political and social issue, they are simply expressing their individual, idiosyncratic perspectives. They refuse to associate their endeavours with a group, a genre or an ideology. Still others argue that feminist drama's association with the women's movement makes it susceptible to charges of didacticism; just as for some, any gathering named feminist or emphasising women is automatically seen as lesbian and therefore either man-hating or sexually 'perverse', so theatre overtly associated with women is sometimes facily reduced to demonstrations of hostility towards men and towards heterosexuality.

Despite these resistances, since the early sixties approximately 300 plays by women have been published in Britain and the United States; more than half of these arise

out of an acknowledged and apparent feminist consciousness, and many others are illuminating of women's roles and their relationships to men in society. At least another 100 feminist plays have been produced but remain unpublished. Published and unpublished feminist plays have won recognition in both Britain and the United States. In 1981 alone, Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* and Wendy Kesselman's *My Sister in this House* won major prizes. The public emergence of a genre of feminist theatre has also begun to ease the way for publication of collections of feminist plays such as those edited by Michelene Wandor in Britain and Honor Moore in the United States. The publication in 1981 of two very different but equally serious studies of feminist consciousness in the theatre, Wandor's *Understudies*, and Helen Chinoy and Linda Jenkins's *Women in American Theatre*, marks yet another recognition that feminist theatre is no longer a tenuous experiment.

As important as these indices of public acknowledgement, is the vitality of a complex network of artists and audiences committed to feminism in the theatre. Among the first signs of such a network was the formation in New York in 1972 of the Women's Theater Council, a group of six women playwrights dedicated to the discovery and production of new plays by women. Each of the founding members – Maria Irene Fornes, Rosalyn Drexler, Julie Bovasso, Adrienne Kennedy, Rochelle Owens and Megan Terry – had written a number of produced plays, but all were in agreement that the mainstream New York theatre was insufficiently supportive of plays by women. Their aim for their first season was to produce in repertory one play by each of the founding members, but their larger vision was of a 'mighty corpuscle' that served as a magnet to other plays by women. The plays they produced would escape the

reductions these women perceived in the 'masculine-oriented theatre'; gone would be the 'bitch, the goddess and the whore with the heart of gold'. 'Men are writing out of their dreams', Irene Fornes told Mel Gussow, the *New York Times* critic, on the occasion of the formation of the group. 'Ours are feminine dreams. Now we can say yes, we are women.'

A year after its creation, the Women's Theater Council evolved into Theater Strategy, a larger group of twenty-three playwrights that now included male playwrights like Ed Bullins, Sam Shepard and John Ford Noonan. Although that group, too, gradually dissolved its formal ties, in part because of insufficient funding, many of the women involved have continued to make special efforts to encourage and support each other's work and work by new women playwrights.

In Britain, the first network of feminist dramatists was comprised of a series of threads drawn from socialist groups, agit-prop theatre, lunch-time theatre and an experimentally inclined group concerned with theatre in education. In 1973, Ed Berman, an American by birth, and founder of the Almost Free Theatre, organised a lunch-time festival specifically of plays by women; meetings to read scripts and plan the festival were open to any woman who wanted to attend, and the response was substantial.

During the early seventies, the Arts Council in England was moderately supportive of new 'fringe' theatre groups, but in 1975, it cut much of this funding. In response, thirty playwrights formed the Theatre Writers' Group, and a year later, they and others formed the Theatre Writers' Union. The majority of members were men, but both male and female feminist playwrights were influential in the organisation. These groups and the informal network sustained by Michelene Wandor have brought a feminist perspective to a variety of productions.