

# Women in theatre: the WTG

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By Suzanne Spinner

The present Women's Theatre Group began in March 1974 with the production of *Women's Weekly Volume I* in the Back Theatre of the Pram Factory. *Women's Weekly* in a raucous revue style, explored the media manipulations of women's image and dismantled the methods of advertising and women's magazines, creating in its wake some memorable images: macabre home-hints, menacing aerosol vaginal deodorants. Its subversive theme song: "Nova, Pol and the Fairfax papers/teach us all the feminine graces/Keep us in our places", and the stereotype conformity contest (read: beauty contest) judged by the Great Dick-tator were adapted and used effectively as street theatre for International Women's Day.

The first sortie into women's theatre in Australia came with the production of *Betty Can Jump* in 1972. It examined the role of women in Australian society, past and present, and was also produced at the Pram Factory by the women members of the APG. The immediate impetus for *Betty Can Jump* came from the theory and practice of feminism. 'Scripts' were group-devised during consciousness-raising and workshop sessions. This method of writing has become the prototype for many of the WTG productions since then. Pre-written scripts have only rarely been used as the basis for shows — exceptions being *The Smoke* (April 1976), *Women Times Three* (November 1975) and *Women's Weekly Vol. II* (March 1972). This has been due to the positive politicising and involving

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effects of the group origination method and also because original, dramatic scripts by feminist writers have been scarce.

In fact, the WTG's original aim of promulgating a corps of feminist writers has yet to be realised. *Betty Can Jump* grew out of the frustration felt by APG women with the radical, participatory style being pioneered at the Pram Factory. Collectives or not, it was still a man's world — Williamson, Hibberd, Romeril and Buzo in 1972 had not written a female role between them, and until *Betty Can Jump*, no woman had directed an APG production. Ironically, Kerry Dwyer, the director of *Betty Can Jump* had been the faceless fuckable female lead in Hibberd's first success, *White With Wire Wheels*.

The critical difference between the WTG and the cast of *Betty Can Jump* was that the WTG was not and never has been entirely composed of women members of the APG. On the contrary, there has been a pattern of decreasing participation by APG women, and a corresponding movement by some WTG members toward participation in APG productions. Any woman who is interested may work on a WTG production and until the period of funding by International Women's Year, when workers on WTG shows were paid, most of the WTG were rank amateurs often with full-time jobs and/or families.

The WTG aims to break down elitism and the mystique of professionalism by the learning and exchange of theatrical skills and technical competence. In the beginning one of the main concerns was balancing the rival priorities of process and product. The professional actors were often concerned about the standards of shows, while other women were more concerned with what was said, rather than how. The WTG functions as a



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working democracy with large weekly meetings and smaller, more frequent workshop/rehearsal sessions. Although the organisation has been formally non-hierarchical, informal hierarchies and elites have arisen, so watchful efforts are made to prevent this.

In 1975, as a result of International Women's Year, funding and the subsequent extension of WTG projects, an administrator was selected. She comes from the group and oversees all WTG activities, handles finances and liaises with the outside for a period of three months. This means that power and expertise are not irrevocably alienated from other members of the groups and roles tend to rigidify less.

The need for a particular director(s) has never been considered imperative and there has been some diversity over the three years. Many early productions, such as *The Love Show* (May 1974), *Documentary Theatre* (June 1974) and *Women and Children First* (November

1974) did not have directors designated. Later shows, both group-devised (*Women and Madness* and *Wonder Woman's Revenge*) and scripted (*The Smoke*, *Women Times Three*) — have had particular directors. The first two shows, *Women's Weekly* and *The Love Show* which dealt with the ideological mystification of relationships — love, romance, marriage — were broadly humorous revue-style interspersed with songs.

Later shows became more oriented around particular issues and seemingly more 'serious'. This trend began with the *Documentary Theatre* production based on documents and personal accounts of the position of teenage girls in Winlaton charged with being in moral danger. *Women and Children First* used masks and puppets to explore the nature of female culture through myth. *Women and Madness: Add A Grated Laugh or Two*, which drew on Phyllis Chessler's book, was concerned with the effects of normalising institutions, such as marriage and the family, on women's sanity. Alongside these largescale productions a vigorous and innovative feminist street theatre has been developed and taken to schools, factories, and public meetings. These have dealt with beauty contests, secretarial work, medicine, and women and work.

In late 1975, the WTG moved out of the Pram Factory into an old warehouse in Faraday Street. *Wonder Woman's Revenge* (May 1976) was their first major production outside the Pram Factory. This production was also the first not to have any APC members either in the cast or directing and so marked the beginning of a truly self-reliant women's theatre.

In this article I have tried to outline the aims and practices of the WTG, the context in which it arose and reasons for which it was formed. I have not endeavoured to either deal critically with any productions nor to describe any personal responses of my own, whether as a feminist, a theatre critic, or a one-time member. Nor have I indicated in any depth the range of activities undertaken by the WTG. Anyone interested in knowing what it would be like to work on a WTG type production should read Helen Garner's article on *Betty Can Jump* in *Dissent* (Winter 1972).



'Women and Work'