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SINCE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR

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## SINCE BETTY JUMPED: THEATRE AND FEMINISM IN MELBOURNE

The first sortie into women's theatre in Australia came with the production of **Betty Can Jump** at the Pram Factory in January 1972. Devised by no single writer, the show consisted of improvisations and workshops on documentary material, selected to present a history of women in Australia ranging from the Female Factory at Parramatta, through the hardened, tragically limited lives of bush women, to contemporary manifestations of sexism, whether in the public bar or in the lecture hall. The immediate impetus for the production came from the theory and practice of feminism. For the director, Kerry Dwyer, it was 'the unifying factor'; for Claire Dobbin, one of the six women (there was also one man) who acted in the production, theatre had always been a 'political weapon'. **Betty Can Jump** united the two concerns. 'Just the act of women standing up,' Dobbin added, 'and making a statement [was] very important'. **Betty Can Jump** grew directly out of the frustrations felt by the women of the Australian Performing Group with the radical participatory style being pioneered at the Pram Factory. Collective or not, the APG was functionally a male-dominated universe. In 1972 the male writers who provided the major scripts — Hibberd, Williamson, Oakley and Romeril — had written few strong female roles.

**Betty Can Jump** attracted large audiences, and drew a positive response from within the APG, and from the women's movement. It also began the process of re-education of critics and the theatre community in the application of feminism to theatre. However there was no follow-up until two years later, when the Women's Theatre Group was formed. The reasons for this hiatus lie in the embattled position of the APG itself; the shortage of available theatre space (it was not until 1974 that a second,

smaller space became available in the Back Theatre) and the lack of independent impetus from the women's movement.

Claire Dobbin believes that the group was deflected by a number of things, not the least of which was the success of **Betty Can Jump**. At one level, women were lulled into thinking that they were having an effect on the APG, and on another they believed that the APG was where it was 'all happening theatrically' anyway; they were not ready at that time to commit themselves to feminist theatre only. 'We were made to feel we had achieved what we set out to do with **Betty Can Jump**, and we agreed with the general feeling around the APG . . . that it should be a plural group, and that we would be wrong to cause a split'. The idea of setting up a closed group was seen as potentially 'dangerous and destructive', Evelyn Krape added; the difficulty of both uniting the women and combating that fear was too great. But by 1974 the time was ripe. 'Women's theatre was not in opposition to anything any more, the men had changed, and the women involved were not just APG women. So the WTG could work independently of the APG'.<sup>1</sup>

The 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. It was a raucous revue-style production which explored the media manipulations of the female image in women's magazines — in its more blatant form in **The Women's Weekly**, and in its more insidious 'new woman' image in **Cleo** and **Pol**. Its strength lay in its accurate reflection of dominant patriarchal ideology, as all the material in the show was culled directly from articles, advertisements, stories and interviews in these magazines. The refrain of the theme song was: 'Nova, Pol and the Fairfax Papers/teach us all the feminine graces/keep us in our places'. The show created some memorable images, ranging from the macabre relish with which some of the more bizarre home hints were related to the menacing spectre of women with pegs on their noses and hands on their crotches being 'liberated' by economy-sized aerosol vaginal deodorants.

The WTG aimed at opening up theatre to more women, breaking down elitism and the mystique of professionalism by learning and exchanging theatrical skills and technical competences. In the beginning, one of the main concerns was balancing the rival priorities of process and product. The professional actors within the group were often concerned about the standards of productions, while other women were more concerned with what was actually said. In fact, the crucial difference between the WTG and the cast of **Betty Can Jump** was that the WTG had never been entirely made up of women from the APG; on the contrary, there was a pattern of decreasing participation by APG women, and a corresponding movement by some WTG members towards involvement in the APG collective and productions. Any interested woman could work in the WTG, and until International Women's Year 1975, when the group was

funded and workers on shows paid, most of the WTG were rank amateurs, usually with full-time jobs and/or families.

The method of originating scripts within the group from improvisations based either on personal experience or on documentary material, pioneered in **Betty Can Jump**, was to become the prototype of many WTG productions. Arising partly from the dearth of a suitable literature, the result was that the process of production became as effective a means of politicising actors as the final act of performance. Some of the strongest WTG shows were put together in this way. **The Love Show** (1974) was developed around the theme of debunking popular mythologies surrounding that 'many splendoured thing', and the **Documentary Theatre** staged in the same year used transcripts and interviews from girls in Winlaton who had been remanded for being in moral danger. **The Women and Madness Show: Add a Grated Laugh or Two** drew its inspiration from Phyllis Chessler's book, and improvised scenes about the effects of the normalising institutions of society such as marriage and the family on women's sanity. Street Theatre and travelling shows for factories and schools on women in prison, women and work and women and medicine were similarly devised.

However, pre-written scripts were used on occasion, the best of these being written in direct response to the group. Most notable was the 1975 production, under the direction of Alison Richards, of three short new plays by Finola Moorhead, Jane Bradhurst and Di King, played together in a season entitled **Women Times Three**. The related matter of direction — to direct or not to direct — was always a vexed question within the WTG, in the same way as the whole question of hierarchies within groups haunted the women's movement in general in the early Seventies. At first hierarchies were assiduously avoided in the organisation; until, as I remember it, dissatisfaction mounted with the vast, often frustrating, open weekly meetings. A stunning little paper from an American feminist group on 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' was circulated and avidly read. Realising that we were enmeshed in informal elites, moves were taken to formalise meetings and a rotating co-ordinatorship was created. By mid-1975, the need for a director for each production was acknowledged, and Evelyn Krape directed **Add a Grated Laugh or Two**. Subsequently the group involved directors in all projects.

At the end of the year the WTG moved out of the Pram Factory into an old warehouse in Faraday Street called The Space; early the following year productions began. The major one for 1976 was **Wonder Woman's Revenge** — a group-devised show directed by Alison Richards. It was the first WTG production in which no APG women appeared; while this clearly represented a victory for autonomy, it can be seen, retrospectively, to have marked the end of the WTG as a viable force within the general community. Men were not, in fact, excluded from the audience, as they were from those of subsequent productions; even so, **Wonder Woman's**

**Revenge** promulgated a style of theatre that was both private and self-referring, and almost as parochial and exclusivist as the traditional theatre, in relation to which the WTG had been launched as an alternative. One reviewer, Bronwen Handyside, launched a cogently argued attack on the show from a feminist perspective, and voiced a concern that many of us, including former members of the WTG like myself, felt about this new direction of the group. Handyside took issue with what she characterised as the two great illogical premises that had become rife in the Women's Movement:

First, that simply because we are female, anything we think or do especially in a feminist context is, as a matter of course, valuable and significant [and secondly] that anybody who criticises what we say or do is not criticising us because we're incompetent, careless, self-indulgent and simple-minded, but because we are female.<sup>2</sup>

**Wonder Woman's Revenge** turned out to be the end of the WTG as an effective propaganda agent of feminism and theatre. In assessing its demise, it is difficult to separate the decline in interest in developing theatre/communicative skills from the separatist internally self-justifying politics that developed from 1976 onwards, all the more so since they are part of the same cluster of quasi-feminist beliefs about the relationship between the private and the public realm of women's experience. What was so new and exciting and politically sound about the WTG in its early phase was that the shows were conceived and executed entirely by women, and that they were profoundly accessible to sympathetic audiences; the level of skill was such that it enhanced communication. But if one of the prime tenets of feminism is the making of the personal political, then it is a gross distortion to make the personal the ultimate goal without taking heed of the wider political context. This separatism tended to do. Separatism is a powerful political tool for feminists, and is likely to be a part of any feminist activity: it enables women to focus more sharply on their own experience, and to discover abilities and develop skills they did not know they possessed; indeed that is what consciousness-raising is about. But for many of us, separatism is part of an overall strategy and not an end in itself, certainly not intrinsically ideologically purer than the grubby engagement with the real world of men and other (non-feminist) women. Separatism can all too easily endorse a sheltered workshop attitude to women's activities, with the result that these activities *per se* require special pleading. Just as organisation was a tainted word in feminist circles until it was realised that without effective organisation any chance of promoting change was stillborn, professionalism was a similar spectre haunting the progress of the women's movement. In the beginning an indirect ratio seemed to operate — the sounder and purer you were ideologically, the worse you did it; alternatively, if you did anything well, you thereby betrayed your enslavement to the patriarchal mould. This is not only specious reasoning, but condemns feminism to a social determinism by allowing the patriarchy to monopolise all the effective tools and so maintain its hegemony, thereby keeping women in the position of social incompetents and second class citizens.

At the risk of crude generalisation, it would seem that these have been ultimately the crucial dividing issues which sifted out of the WTG the women who wished to pursue separatist theatre goals from those who felt that the time was now ripe for women to pursue feminist goals in a non-separatist way in the theatre world generally. This division does not necessarily correlate with radical and reformist attitudes to women's role in the theatre, though it may well reflect the differing attitudes of lesbians and heterosexual women to separatism in the women's movement at large. As a feminist this is a situation I find as sad as I find it undeniably the case.

Nevertheless the influence of the Women's Theatre Group has been as profound as it has been varied. It increased the opportunities for women to participate in theatre, training many as actors, writers, directors, and in backstage skills — including lighting and sound, traditional preserves of men; it provided a critical perspective on the type of roles usually available to women as actors, and led to the breaking of sexist stereotypes; it led to a revaluation, in feminist terms, of existing works. In a word, it changed audience expectations of the role of women in the theatre.

A group which developed in the APG in 1976, the Stasis Workshop, comprised of Sue Ingleton, Ros De Winter and Robert Meldrum, grew directly out of the work of the WTG; the two women had been members. Their first production was an exploration of the life and art of Sylvia Plath, and in the performance all three actors played Plath. After the script had been culled from her writings, the actors assigned themselves lines on a random basis, crossing boundaries of sex and personality. It was only coincidence that occasionally Robert Meldrum had a male part: in the end the actors were 'being' Plath's writing. They never fell into the trap of trying to be Plath herself. The subsequent productions of the group, which had expanded to include Jenny Kemp, continued the exploration of sex roles, but took established theatre texts as their starting point — Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. *Peer Gynt* involved the three actors in some twenty roles throughout the performance. In the programme they explained that 'to give the role of Peer to one actor would have made the involvement of the others small . . . the answer was to share the role of Peer among us, and once this decision was made there was no sense in adhering strictly to gender allocation of other roles'. But it was not mere expediency that dictated this approach; it allowed the actors a greater freedom to probe the writer's psyche as expressed in the drama. A similar approach was employed with *Antony and Cleopatra*, but the role changes sat less easily on Shakespeare's dense poetry and worked ultimately against the accretion of symbols in the play — the archetypal male and female figures needed exploration for their own sake. Nevertheless these performances pointed in a new direction — the revaluation and rediscovery of texts by male writers from a feminist perspective.

In addition, a number of groups have adopted a WTG model and produced all-women group-developed shows, of which the most notable have been *Finger to the Trigger* and *Roma*. *Finger to the Trigger*, staged in November 1976 at La Mama by Theatre Projects under the direction of James McCaughey, was described as 'an experiment in creating theatre out of the material of the actor, her experience and presence'. Although the programme warned that it was 'not necessarily a woman's play', but rather 'an approach to finding a new kind of theatre on the basis of the distinctive qualities that a woman brings to performance', the fact that the women involved wrote most of the script themselves meant that it certainly felt like women's theatre. At the time I wrote that 'If the group has any affinities with the WTG, it is with their 1975 production *Women and Children First*, but in general *Finger to the Trigger* eschews didactics, politics and confrontation in favour of a tentative exploration of the significantly personal'. More significant was *Roma*, which is about to be made into a film entitled *Just An Ordinary Life*. Developed by Jan McDonald and three other women students from the Victorian College of the Arts, in conjunction with women from the Essendon branch of the YWCA, the research/scripting process took six months. This one-woman play about the life of a middle-aged woman living in the suburbs was staged in a community centre in Essendon in December 1977. The result, as Margaret Geddes noted at the time, was the first realistic portrayal of the middle-aged Australian housewife: in Moonee Ponds, home of Dame Edna herself, four real life Essendon housewives were fighting back.

While the WTG has had no immediate effect on mainstream theatre, it did help to create a climate which made companies such as the Melbourne Theatre Company feel that they had to acknowledge the presence of feminist issues — in general. The MTC first entered the arena of women's theatre in 1976 with a production of Len and Terri Radic's scrapbook stroll through the forgotten byways of women's history in Australia, *Some Of My Best Friends Are Women*, which was a resounding box office success. So it was not surprising that they took the bold step of staging in 1978 *Dusa, Stas, Fish and Vi* by British feminist writer Pam Gems, which played to capacity audiences at Russell Street; it later toured nationally in tandem with Williamson's paean to masculinity, *The Club*. Notwithstanding the fact that *Dusa, Stas, Fish and Vi* was directed by George Ogilvie, the accompanying programme notes fully exploited the connection between Gems' work and the women's movement with the requisite Woolf quotes (A Theatre of One's Own!) together with collaged magazine images of women's oppression. Shortly afterwards Mary O'Malley's *Once A Catholic* was staged, both productions generating the highest audience capacities of the year, 98 per cent, in addition to the greatest general public interest. Nevertheless, apart from a revival of the O'Malley play, no works

by women writers are scheduled for inclusion in the current season, although women are beginning to emerge among the Company's directors; Judith Alexander directs Tributary Productions, the MTC's experimental arm, while it was recently announced that Nano Nagle, a former WTG member, will be assistant director to John Sumner in the forthcoming production of Pinter's **Betrayal**.

Such considerations raise the vexed question of co-option of radical art forms: who indeed are the true inheritors of the WTG? While I endorse productions that provide greater opportunities for women in the theatre in general — opportunities that must be maximised — it is no less imperative that a feminist critique keeps pace with them, so that they do not decline into self-congratulation. Unfortunately there has been scarce evidence of one in the Melbourne dailies: all the critics are men, who have by now learned not to dismiss women's theatre out of hand, but who often lean too far the other way, treating women's theatre either as a crippled form for which due allowance must be made, or else excusing themselves as 'mere men' from making any critical remarks at all. Again, co-option sometimes occurs: a play is detached from its original context, and produced in one which defuses some, or most, of its radical implications.

A case in point was Ntozake Shange's **For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide/When The Rainbow is Enuf**, which was brought to Australia for the Adelaide Festival in 1978 and toured the country for six weeks after. The media release by the Chairman of the Adelaide Festival, Mr Bruce Macklin, was at pains to stress the play's uniqueness as the first Broadway smash hit to come direct to Australia with an all-American cast, and that it was a stable mate of the current smash hit musical **A Chorus Line**. He acknowledged that it was 'a largely autobiographical work which rails at the impotence of coloured girls who allow themselves to be compromised by men', but added the telling phrase that it contained 'a bright and glorious message for everyone regardless of sex, race or nationality.' The production was hard pushed in the comfy confines of the Comedy to recreate the original furious rage and energy with which it had confronted predominantly black audiences in its first off-off Broadway performances. Similarly, Hoopla's most recent success, **Gentlemen Only**, raises questions of co-option but of a different order. The writer, Eve Merriman, is an American feminist, and the play, which is set in an exclusive men's club in New York at the turn of the century, has an all-women cast who enact the roles of society gentlemen. The problem is the play's critical ambiguity: women, in taking the parts of men who display extremely sexist attitudes toward their absent wives and mistresses, very easily lend themselves to a celebration of that sexism, rather than mounting an effective attack upon it. Again it is hard to know what the general audience is responding to; the ambiguity lies both in the writing (feminist or not), and in the amusing novelty of women dressed as men.

On another level, the experience of the WTG has also encouraged Melbourne male writers to deal with what could be called the issues of



Kerry Dwyer as Director; photo Ruth Maddison.

women's lives, and to write plays about women. One of the first of these was Jack Hibberd's **Peggy Sue**, staged in 1974 at the Pram Factory. The cast was drawn from women in the APG who were also at that time involved in the WTG, and directed by Kerry Dwyer. As Bill Garner pointed out, playing the nine different male characterisations in **Peggy Sue** was a complete reversal of the situation in the Hibberd play he had worked on seven years before, **White With Wire Wheels**. But again Hibberd was caught up in the common problem: of seeming to celebrate what he claimed to be criticising. As Jocelyn Clarke commented in **Farrago**:

You'd think that if you wrote a play combining three winners like pornography, feminism, and nostalgia for the Fifties you'd have a hit on your hands . . . The alert reader must be wondering how to combine feminism and pornography? Well, you take a few everyday situations like rape, lesbian sadism, triolism, flashing, striptease, prostitution and female wrestling, and you ask what is the common factor in all these situations? Yes, women are being oppressed. Therefore you are depicting the oppression of women therefore you are a feminist playwright. Neat, huh?

Hibberd had greater success later with **A Toast To Melba**, both in terms of theatre and feminism. Hibberd is most at home creating comic, legendary Australian figures, and in the hands of Evelyn Krape in the original production the part of Melba was both forceful and earthy.

John Romeril is another writer who has been profoundly affected by the feminism within the APG. In particular, there were plenty of roles for women in his most recent works, the co-authored **Dudders** (1976), **The Radio Active Horror Show** (1977) and **Mickey's Moomba** (1979). Both

**Dudders** and **Mickey's Moomba** reflect Romeril's preoccupation with the effect of American imperialism in Australia, but it was only in **Dudders**, set in Newcastle in World War Two, that the role of women in this process was explored. However **The Radio Active Horror Show**, which Romeril wrote in collaboration with the cast, drew some of its strongest female images from the WTG: the three women involved were former members.

Barry Dickins' play **Foolshoe Hotel** won the first APG playwriting competition, and was staged at the Pram Factory in August last year. Virtually a men-only script, it was seen by APG women as the last straw in that direction. In consequence, the programming committee has adopted for the first time this year as a criterion for the selection of plays, the promotion of more roles for women, and a focus on women's consciousness in the plays chosen. Stephen Sewell, the recipient of the second playwriting award, was prevailed upon to rework his play **Traitors** accordingly. The final work, directed by Kerry Dwyer, showed that the rethinking and rewriting had indeed borne fruit. The role of Anna, the Bolshevik intellectual, did more than merely feminise the politics of Stalinism; it located fascism in the personal as well as the public sphere, and made sexual politics an integral part of the *realpolitik* of the time. Meanwhile Barry Dickins has written and staged at La Mama **Bridal Suite**, a one-woman play about Vera, an eccentric and haunted country woman who lives by herself in a run-down hut off the Hume Highway beyond Tarcutta. While the play lacks the easeful naturalistic organisation of **A Stretch of The Imagination**, Vera could easily be seen as the female version of Hibberd's great comic nomad, Monk O'Neill. It may be tendentious to claim that Dickins was caught up in the rising tide of feminism in the APG, but if he wasn't, then he has nevertheless created a strong and interesting female role in Vera.

All of the most interesting women's plays performed in Melbourne over the last two years have been written either by overseas writers, or men, or both; particularly memorable was Kerry Dwyer's superb production of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's **The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant**, for which the credits read like a roll-call of the Women's Theatre Group.<sup>4</sup> Indeed the only Australian women writers whose names immediately come to mind are Dorothy Hewett and New Zealand-born Alma de Groen — neither of whom owe anything to the Women's Theatre Group in Melbourne. Dorothy Hewett's work in plays, poetry and her novel is of such an eclectic and maverick variety that with or without the nourishment of the women's movement she would have gone on writing. But since her feminism predates the rise of new wave feminism in the Seventies, to claim her recent successes as contemporary feminist victories would do a profound disservice to the battles she has won as a woman writer single-handedly. Nevertheless the fact that her plays have been more likely to be produced professionally in the last five years must in part be explained by the increased acceptance of women's work: it was not until 1977 that

Hewett received such attention in Melbourne, her **Golden Oldies** being mounted along with Alma de Groen's **Chidley** as Hoopla's inaugural productions. Hewett and Katherine Susannah Prichard are the two great matriarchal figures, and it is possible to locate in their work useful directions for the new generation of feminist writers to follow. Prichard's political commitment and close observation of the dynamics of oppression comprises one, and Hewett's poetic language, strong visual theatricality and the acutely personal biographical material which she draws upon is another.

In its most flourishing period, the Women's Theatre Group was primarily a performer-oriented theatre rather than a writer's theatre. Hence it should be no surprise that the last few years have seen many of the women who were involved in the WTG moving more decidedly into singing, music and circus performing. But this year there is evidence of a change: a number of women writers, some of them quite new, may be emerging at last. Val Kirwan is La Mama's first writer-in-residence; Jan Cornall is the first woman writer in residence at the Pram Factory. Stasis member Jenny Kemp has written a monologue, as has an entirely new writer, Margot Hilton. Kemp's play **Sheila Alone** was performed at the Pram Factory in September, while Hilton's **Potiphar's Wife** is scheduled for performance shortly at the Nimrod. If the work of these writers is an indication of current trends in women's writing, then we can expect to see a greater emphasis on the personal, funky fragmentary poetic style than has been the case in the past, alongside the now familiar private plaint against the particular men and women the female protagonist has loved or felt betrayed by.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The quotations to this point are taken from interviews with Women's Theatre Group members, **Lip** 1978/79, pp.150-155.
- <sup>2</sup> Bronwen Handyside, 'Man Bites Dog. Dog Eats Man: Reviews of Wonder Woman's Revenge (WTG) and Sisters (APG)' **Lip** No. 1, (October 1976).
- <sup>3</sup> **The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant** was directed by Kerry Dwyer and the three main parts of Petra, her lover Karin and her servant/companion Marlene were played by Nano Nagle, Carol Porter and Ursula Harrison — all of whom were former WTG members. Carol Porter designed the set and the lighting was done by Laurel Frank, Ponch Hawkes and Michelle Johnson — all of whom learnt their skills in the WTG.