

THEATRE & FEMINISM FROM THEN TILL NOW

When *Betty Can Jump* was staged at the Pram Factory in 1972, it was the first sortie into women's theatre in Australia and marked the beginning of a new era of increasing involvement by women in theatre as actors, directors and writers, although it was another two years before the Women's Theatre Group (WTG) was formed in 1974. The impact of New Wave feminism on the arts in Australia led to an upsurge of theatre activity in Melbourne which was centred on the WTG, while in Sydney feminists became involved in filmmaking.

The reasons for this are obvious — Feminism brings with it a critique of patriarchal society which is then applied to the prevailing situation, and in Melbourne in the early seventies a form of radical theatre had evolved and women were part of it. The advent of feminism meant that women were able to critically re-evaluate their role in it.

Feminism as a critical social theory was first articulated as practice vis a vis

theatre through the formation of the WTG. The cast of *Betty Can Jump* had been drawn from the ranks of the Australian Performing Group, where the women were frustrated by the lack of significant, non-stereotypical roles available to them as actors, in the work of the male writers who were then writing for the APG.

When the WTG was formed its members included some APG women but the group was open and provided an opportunity for any interested women to participate. In fact many of the women who joined the WTG had had no previous theatre experience. Thus while the group was united by its commitment to feminism it was divided in its attitude to professionalism. However balancing the contradictory aims of process and product only became divisive in the later years when the group was safely established.

In the beginning when the group was embattled, survival was a premium and all that mattered was

that women were working and learning, and that the show went on. As it was originally conceived the WTG aimed to open up theatre to more women by the learning and exchanging of theatre and technical skills, and to create a new depiction of women within a new form of theatre. During its existence the WTG was an agent of social, political and personal change, it disseminated ideas about theatre and feminism and provided a unique space and opportunity for women to work out many of the questions which feminism raises about theatre practice.

Between 1974 and 1976, the WTG staged more than ten shows in the Pram Factory as well as a number of street theatre and travelling shows in factories, shopping centres, at demonstrations and in schools. In the main, shows were developed through group improvisation and in workshops. Suitable pre-existing scripts by women writers were few and far between, although strenuous

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efforts were made to search out scripts and encourage writers.

In 1975 during International Women's year when the group was at its most active stage, a season of three short plays was produced from scripts specially written for the group. However scripts devised from within the group were its mainstay, and these provided a useful means of politicising the women who worked on a particular show.

By 1976 when the group had moved into their own theatre, *The Space*, in Faraday Street Carlton, they had become a totally autonomous group, distinct from the Pram Factory and their main production that year, *Wonder Woman's Revenge* was distinguished by the fact that no APG women acted in it. However by the end of that year the group had declined as a viable force in the theatre community. In assessing the reasons for its demise it is difficult to separate the decline in interest in developing theatre/communicative skills from what had, by then, become a separatist, internally self-justifying feminist ideology. The WTG pioneered experiments in non-scripted group devised performance; non hierarchial group organisation; collective direction of productions and the breaking down of amateur/professional dichotomies in theatre. However these issues were also the cause of much friction and critical self evaluation within the group. Ultimately these became the crucial dividing issues which sifted out of the

WTG those women who wished to pursue a form of separatist women's theatre, from those who wished to pursue feminism in the theatre world at large.

Nevertheless the WTG had a profound and lasting impact on theatre in Melbourne and it significantly contributed to a climate in which theatre made by and about the experiences of women became publically acceptable, even fashionable. So that by 1978 when the WTG, while not officially disbanded, was in a state of strategic withdrawal, women were more visible than they had ever been in the Melbourne theatre world. Everywhere you turned it seemed there were plays by and about women: *For Coloured Girls When The Rainbow Is Not Enough* was playing to packed houses at the Comedy Theatre and at Russell Street *Dusa Fish, Sias and Vi* was playing to capacity audiences, while at La Mama *Savage Sepia*, a locally written, all

woman production, was also enjoying good houses and sympathetic reviews. By the end of the year two of the most successful shows staged by the APG were Kerry Dwyer's production of Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears Of Petra Von Kant* and Fay Mokotow's production of Susan Griffin's *Voices* — both Dwyer and Mokotow had been members of the WTG and the acting and production credits for *The Bitter Tears...* read like a veritable roll call of ex Women's Theatre Group members.

In 1979 this trend continued and has been compounded by the emergence of a number of women as directors, most of whom have come out of the APG as a result of their policy last year to discriminate positively in favour of greater opportunities for women.

The Melbourne Theatre Company is not one to be left behind, and Judith Alexander, the director of Tributary productions began directing productions upstairs at The Athenaeum, while Nano Nagle has just recently been assistant director to



Valerie Kirwan, writer in residence with La Mama in 1979.

John Sumner on Pinter's *Betrayal*.

However perhaps the most significant change this year has been the emergence of a number of women writers. It is significant because getting women to write for theatre, while it was always a primary aim of the WTG, was an ideal of the group that was never fully realised. In a recent interview, Dorothy Hewett, the best known and most prolific woman playwright in Australia, spoke about the difficulties facing women playwrights:

"If you think about women playwrights in English Literature, generally, there's not very many of us. I don't know what this says. Does it say that the whole mechanics of which plays are constructed are difficult for women? Does it say that they find it difficult to work within theatre structures? I think probably the second is true, that it is difficult to work because of the existing theatre structures and also maybe that intense co-operative effort is made difficult for women because of their past experiences and their timidity."

Of the four women writers whose work was produced last year — Val Kirwan, Jenny Kemp, Margot Hilton and Jan Cornall — only Kemp and Cornall expressly identify themselves as feminists. Kirwan and Hilton are concerned to be seen as writers and eschew even the term "woman writer". Kirwan has been writing and producing her own work at La Mama since 1974 and she has been writer-in-residence there last year. Nevertheless her production in August of *The Art of Lobster Whistling* in its exploration of sexual fantasy and its richly evocative visual style betrayed an interest in themes and images which are shared by feminist artists and writers. Both Margot Hilton's *Potiphar's Wife* and Jenny Kemp's *Sheila Alone* were one woman shows, which in stylistically very different ways explored the attitude of a contemporary "liberated" woman towards herself and her lovers. Both works had an unambiguous autobiographical reference and in the use of their own experience made over, the writer's concerns fall within the range of those articulated by the WTG.

Potiphar's Wife was staged at The

Nimrod and according to John Willett, it was "rambling and self indulgent" while *Sheila Alone* was staged in the Back Theatre of the Pram Factory and directed by Kemp herself. Kemp has been working with the Stasis Workshop for some years and like their work, *Sheila Alone* is very much theatre by actors about the process of acting. Kemp described it as, "not a naturalistic play" but, "a study on observation of the rhythms of the female mind...The playwright is concerned with developing theatre which is expressing female creativity and which is liberated from pre-existing forms and structures." While Kemp does not claim *Sheila* as "her vision of theatre" she is, of the four



Carole Porter, 'Virgin White' in *The Love Show*, Women's Theatre Group 1974. Photo: Micky Allen.

playwrights, the one most concerned with exploration of form and the attempt to forge new forms to delineate the specificity of women's experience.

As John Romeril said in the January issue of *The Perambulator*, in an article entitled "On Not Being Treated As A Minority",

Second wave feminism will change theatre, in fact change art production of every sort...Would men write for an institution that consistently contrived to traduce their sex? Change that and the plays will come. The point though is not to wait for them. We're locked into a time and a place. Very real cultural

momentums have dumped us. The problem for women who are learning how to write for a theatre they've been locked out of.

This sense of being locked out of traditional theatre manifests itself in women's writing in a number of different ways and while it limits possibilities open to them, it also opens up others. For instance the three naturalistic, Williamsonian plays so far proved not to attract many women writers and this fact raises some questions about the constituent patriarchal form. On the other hand one-person monologues which allow unlimited interiorisation for movement of the unconscious mind and support a non-naturalistic, imagistic form of theatre are proving to offer exciting potential for women writers. Similarly poetry and song have been taken up with renewed vitality by women writers. Susan Griffin (*Voices*) and Ntozake Shange (*For Colored Girls...*) are both poets and these plays are theatrical poems.

In Australia, Dorothy Hewett is the major woman poet writing for theatre, but her work is as strong in theatre as it is in poetry. Song has been the basis of two of the most successful shows by women this year — Robert Archer's *A Star Is Torn* and Jan Cornall's *Falling In Love Again*. Archer used well known songs of legendary women singers which he strung together with a commentary on the lives of the women who made those songs their signatures, to make a psychobiographical history of a female celebrity/performer. While Cornall wrote the twenty four songs which constituted *Falling In Love Again* around a critique of romantic love and early seventies sexual liberation. The form of both of the shows was characteristic of much of the new feminist art in its fragmentation and allusive discursiveness.

Thus while there has been a considerable upsurge in women's writing in the past year a fully fledged feminist writer for theatre has not yet emerged, but this is hardly surprising when you consider that the roots of feminism and theatre in Melbourne were with the WTG which was a performer oriented rather than a writer oriented theatre.