

SHAKESPEARE'S SISTERS

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The growth of the alternative theatre movement in the 70s, coinciding with the growth of the women's movement from its official beginnings in Britain in 1970, gave women an opportunity to work on an unprecedented scale in areas where doors were previously closed and often with a raised consciousness of women's exploitation and oppression within society. Today there are more women working in the theatre than ever before in its history. Not just in the traditional servicing (administrative) roles, or the sex-stereotyped sex-object (actress) roles, but as writers, designers, technicians and occasionally as artistic directors. This is a major achievement.

And yet, until the production of Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine* in 1980, the National Theatre had not produced a single play by a woman either living or dead. Since then it has done three others including one commissioned for the Cottesloe (this was Olwen Wymark's adaptation of the *One Woman Plays* by Franca Rame and Dario Fo); and a production of Michelene Wandor's *Aurora Leigh* originally produced by Mrs Worthington's Daughters. In its whole history the Royal Shakespeare Company has produced plays by three women: these were Pam Gems' *Piaf* (which transferred to the West End) and *Queen Christina* and Mary O'Malley's *Look Out: Here Comes Trouble* as well as two plays by Marguerite Duras. The National Theatre has, to date, used one woman director, though it had previously employed three women as apprentice directors producing smaller-scale productions. Until recently, the RSC had

employed three women directors — the influential Buzz Goodbody who founded The Other Place and who committed suicide in 1975, and subsequently Penny Cherns and Jane Howell, directing one show each since the theatre started. Currently, the RSC has two women attached to them as assistant directors. Women designers have fared better as they have throughout the theatre.

Figures from the major subsidised companies are not untypical of the patterns of employment of women in other areas of the theatre. Of the 42 shows running in the West End in one week in February, only 5 were written, and none directed, by women. On London's fringe, in that same week, of 47 shows, only 7 were written, and two directed, by women.

The truth is that women are still virtually invisible in positions of power. And even when they are involved in creating important work, it is ignored, insufficiently acknowledged, denied the attention and status it deserves, or it is devalued. While the *conditions* under which women's work is created are rarely given any consideration.

In 1929 Virginia Woolf imagined the fate of Shakespeare's sister, had he had one. As a young woman with the same talent and ambition, she would have had to 'mend stockings and mind the stew, not moon about with books'. Resisting the marriage arranged by her parents, she would have been beaten. Running away to London in pursuit of her art and craft, she would seek to act. But 'men laughed in her face', a manager 'bellowed something about poodles

dancing and women acting'. She could get no training and was unsafe on the streets alone at night. So . . . she got pregnant (by a 'nice' man), and then killed herself 'for who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?'

Given the conditions of their lives, would it be possible for any woman to write the plays of Pinter or Osborne or Bond in the present day, any more than it was 'impossible for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare' then? The conditions under which women live and try to work today are only different in degree, and in certain areas not even all that much different. We are still oppressed.

Expectations of women, and women's expectations of themselves are low. Because of cultural conditioning and sex-role stereotyping, it is hard for most women to even conceive of themselves as artists, or to consider that a powerful and influential career in the theatre outside of acting might be possible. Many don't make the attempt; and some would question the value of doing so anyway within the male-created and male-dominated structures that exist. Buzz Goodbody is an archetype of the woman who did make the attempt, suffered the consequences and committed suicide. The odds were stacked against her simply on the grounds of her sex. Buzz Goodbody blamed herself when things went wrong, and felt that if she were successful, people would say, 'what a good director', but if a failure, 'the woman can't do it.'

It was pregnancy which finally put paid to all aspirations Shakespeare's sister might have had to being an artist. And it is still

*From the production of
Shakespeare's Sisters by Monstrous Regiment*



childbearing and rearing which are the greatest material constraints on women working today. All women either have children, have had children, will have children or have made the choice not to (and then manage their fertility or their sexual relationships in order not to). So all women are concerned, directly or indirectly, with child-raising, work done in isolation with little support emotionally or economically. Many women, of course, do the double shift of domestic and creative work, at great cost, the one unpaid the other badly paid. So 'mother-

hood' is a key factor determining whether women can work, when, and under what pressures. In the last analysis Virginia Woolf valued 'a room of her own' and an income of £500 a year more than the vote for women. There is now equal pay and sex discrimination legislation on the statute books. But how many women have their own spaces, or independence, or images of themselves as artists, as people with power?

Virginia Woolf and her writing are currently a symbol and source of inspiration for many women in the theatre, women for

whom suicide is not the collective solution, but rather the celebration of 'women live'. Increasingly, in the arts and entertainment industries, women are taking charge of making themselves visible — in performance, in the positions of power they do hold, and from the platforms of conferences and publications, speaking out about their work and working conditions. We are asking for better, and better paid work, due recognition of work done and acknowledgement and provision for the raising of the next generation. •

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