

## **The 'F' Word: Feminism, Theatre and Performance – Critical Futures**

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That feminism has made significant interventions into theatre and performance scholarship is without question. However, at this moment in time, what is far less certain are the futures of feminism and feminist theatre scholarship. Co-editing *Feminist Futures: Theatre Performance Theory*, Gerry Harris and I explain how the question mark in our title is crucial: '[t]his question mark poses the future of feminism and the relation between feminism and theatre and performance as a question and as being *in* question' (1). The purpose of these brief reflections on the 'F' word, is to consider the current, uncertain state of feminism and to think of the possible ways in which feminism, given its state of uncertainty, may continue to have an impact on the scholarship and practice of theatre. In order to reflect on these future feminist-theatre uncertainties, I need to take a brief contextualising step back into the feminist-theatre traditions of the past.

### **Feminism and Theatre – Beginnings**

If feminism 'begins' anywhere, it begins with feelings of gender-based exclusion: with the growing awareness that women's lives have been marginalised and trivialised by male-dominated social systems and cultural values. Back in the eighties, it was this sense of exclusion for women of my UK-based, theatre generation that fuelled the desire to see women's theatre included, rather than excluded, from the syllabus. To achieve this required feminist interventions into all three key areas of theatre studies as it was then taught – history, theory and practice. At first, feminist attentions concentrated largely on theatre history, mainly for two reasons:

- 1) because the idea of recovery generally was important to feminism as women recognised that they had been hidden from history and culture, and so were keen to uncover a silenced past to ensure that they would be written into future histories
- and
- 2) because theatre history was more established than theory (though see below).

Recovering women from theatre history; recovering or finding plays by women that offered more roles for women and a greater attention to the representation of women's experiences, challenged the male-dominated theatre canon in terms of both the study and practice of theatre (see Aston, *Feminism and Theatre*, ch 2). Practically speaking, this began to suggest ways out of the difficulties created by the gender imbalance between the overwhelmingly large numbers of female to male students taking theatre courses, versus the relatively few, decent roles for women in the male-dominated theatre canon. Previously this had meant adopting various canny gender strategies to adapt 'classical,' 'canonical' texts to meet the gender demands of production contexts: the cross-casting of women in male roles or multiple shared/castings for women so that you might have a show, for example, that featured Chekhov's thirty sisters, or one that had ever so many Juliets and one 'lucky' Romeo.

Alongside this challenge to canonical texts and the emergence of gender-aware practices came the theory explosion of the eighties as theatre studies, along with many other disciplines, began to transform its modes of thinking through theoretical frameworks; was open to and opened up by new ways of seeing as it connected and intersected with a diverse body of critical theory. Semiotics, understanding the languages of theatre as a complex sign system, shifted critical attention away from what to *how* meaning is created and produced, while feminism had its own political and theoretical concerns regarding the cultural production of 'Woman' as sign and its own post-Lacanian objections to the 'lack' of a female subject. In this context, the critical turn towards French feminist theory proved highly influential. Ideas from this particular 'body' of feminist theory, such as Hélène Cixous's concept of an *écriture féminine*, were attractive to feminist practitioners looking for ways to challenge the malestream of theatre texts and production contexts. The idea of 'writing', returning to the body as a means of giving 'voice' to experiences of women repressed and marginalised by patriarchal language and culture constituted an important 'stage' in the evolution of feminist ideas and practice. Indeed, for a moment in the late eighties it very much appeared as though feminist-theatre futures would lie with the possibilities of staging a 'feminine' language that would 'speak' differently to us as women.

## Enter Gender

However, in the nineties things were to take a rather different critical turn, by turning away from the idea of embodying language through an idea of writing the feminine towards the idea of the Butlerian 'beyond gender' project that instead offered the critical promise of a subject de-regulated by the governance of gender norms. Important though the 'beyond gender' project has been, at the same time it has had the effect of confining 'gender troubles' to an overarching grand narrative of anti-essentialism. As Sue-Ellen Case cautions in respect of feminist and queer politics, post-structuralist, anti-essentialist theorising risks 'operat[ing] in the refined atmosphere of "pure" theory and writing', thereby 'abandoning earlier materialist discourses that signalled to active, grassroots coalitions while claiming a less essentialist base' (12). In brief, as a critical manoeuvre, she warns that it constitutes a 'race into theory' that moves 'away from the site of material interventions' (37).

The 'race into theory' has also proved problematic for the relationship between theory and practice in the field of feminism and theatre studies. In the past, as previously explained, thinking feminism evolved through the *interplay* of feminist theorising and gender-aware practice. The theatre, for example, of Caryl Churchill, arguably the most influential of women playwrights in the first wave of feminism and theatre, helped to *create* ideas about what constituted feminist theatre practice as her plays variously showed what could be *done* to demonstrate and alienate oppressive regimes of class, ethnicities, sexualities and gender. But this since has tended to give way to an hierarchical, dualistic frame where practice is relegated to a colonised 'other' serving a theoretical end in which the specificity of the performance, the practice, is lost to modes and models of interdisciplinary enquiry (see Aston & Harris, *Performance Practice and Process*, ch 1). Moreover, given the dominance of the anti-essentialist paradigm, this has meant a focus on certain types of practice that fit this theory mode, while other kinds of women's theatre and performance work have been deemed inadmissible 'misfits'.

In retrospect it is perhaps not surprising to find this race into 'pure' (gender) theory coinciding with the decline of feminism as a political movement. Without the grassroots activism, the feminism of the streets and protests which took place *outside* of the academy and the ground swell of women practicing theatre professionally, forming

their own companies and collectives as they had done in the seventies and eighties, then the world of academic ideas became increasingly divorced from social realities, and in theatre, theory was more inclined to split off from practice.

The decline in feminism generally is consequent in part upon feminism's own fragmentation – specifically the rise of identity politics and the need to acknowledge differences that, in consequence, made it hard to identify with 'women anything'. While feminism struggled with the divides of its own making it also had to contend with the climate of a backlash against feminism and the generational divide between feminists of the seventies generation and younger generations of women who tended to distance themselves from the 'f-word', not least – albeit not exclusively – on account of deeming the battle for women's liberation as having been fought and won. All of which has, in sum, contributed to the idea that now is the time of post-feminism.

With the climate of post-feminism, the absence of feminism as a movement, and with the added complications of the anti-essentialist theory drive and the hierarchical theatre-theory-practice relations – what can I argue as a more progressive future for the project of feminism and theatre? In response, I want to propose the following strategies that have more hopeful futures in mind. Specifically, my proposals are for:

- A relaxation of the 'beyond gender' theory project.
- A revisiting and re-evaluating of theory and practice relations.
- A reconsideration and contestation of *Western* feminism and theatre.
- A proposal for communiTIES of feminism and theatre, locally and globally.

There is no hierarchy intended here; no either ors, but rather an interdependent mixing of these various strategies to weave a more progressive fabric of feminism and feminist-theatre futures.

### **'Beside' the 'Beyond Gender' Project**

Following through on the cautionary note sounded in Case's concerns about the 'race into theory' and the anti-essentialist drive, I want to advocate not a race away from theory, but rather a relaxation of the theoretical grip on anti-essentialism. My thinking here has been

influenced largely by the late Eve Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Introduced as 'a project to explore promising tools and techniques for nondualistic thought and pedagogy' (1), Sedgwick proposes 'the art of *loosing*' (3) as she orientates her thinking outside of the essentialist/anti-essentialist binary, by offering a non-dualistic paradigm of her own, one based on the notion of 'beside'. As a strategy it gestures to the importance of thinking not in terms of what is already known, but of coming to think 'otherwise' – stepping to the side of a well-trodden theoretical path in the expectation of seeing and coming to know differently.

I am attracted to Sedgwick's proposition of 'beside' for thinking feminism. For me the attraction of 'beside' lies in the possibilities of thinking outside the dualistic framework of essentialism/anti-essentialism and its encouragement of more heterogeneous modes of theorising which allow for embodied, situated knowledge to lie beside the discursive, textual modes that seek to trouble or deconstruct the governance of gender. The feminist shift from things to words that concerned sociologist Michèle Barrett, that is from 'things' like 'low pay, rape or female foeticide' to a focus on 'the discursive construction of marginality in a text or document' (201), might be revisited or undone through a critical practice that textures text and context, words and things in the same critical feminist writing space. Of course in the practice of writing all 'things' are textual, just as, in other ways, the embodied knowledge of 'things' are also discursively marked by the social and cultural spheres that script them. But in a textured critical practice the writing of 'things', a materialist discourse, might be allowed to speak, 'beside' other formulations or expressions of feminism without necessarily being returned to an earlier essentialist paradigm or being silenced by an anti-essentialist drive. This might then resist what sociologist Angela McRobbie describes as making anti-essentialism the 'new point of faith, a new kind of thing' (91).

While Sedgwick's idea of 'beside' interests me as a feminist scholar, it also appeals to me as a feminist-theatre scholar where I am attracted to the idea of undoing the hierarchical play between theory and practice and of situating theory 'beside' practice giving it a voice on its own terms and in its own right. In general, whatever the field of enquiry, the languages of theatre practice offer up their own strategies for relaxing the grip on theory given that practice, the doing of 'things', does not obey any strict

intellectual or political agenda, but rather mixes up ideas through its own creative process or labour. (For detailed reflections on a feminist resistance to non-hierarchical theory/practice relations, see Aston and Harris, *Performance Practice and Process*).

### **Towards Feminisms and theatre**

As I think my ‘impure’ theory thoughts and posit the possibility of opening up theory-practice relations, I need also to reflect on the term that haunts the fragments of the feminism and theatre story as I am telling it here: Western. And this is where I move towards the third of my four more hopeful strategies to advocate a reconsideration and contestation of Western feminism and theatre.

Thinking feminism in the future tense must necessarily mean contesting the binary of Western feminism and any ‘other’, or all other kinds of feminism. Objections to the hierarchical (colonialist) arrangement of First and Third World feminisms have already made and are making a difference to feminism in an important and influential body of work by feminist-postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, M. Jacqui Alexander, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Sarah Ahmed, among many others. Broadly, this critical terrain argues that there is every need for feminism to think outside its site of white Western privilege; every need to contest ways in which Western feminism has established its own apartheid of First and Third World feminisms.

The state of Western post-feminism as described earlier, is especially unhelpful, dangerous even, to cross-cultural, cross-border feminist thinking because it declares a state of independence and in that declaration cuts itself off not only from the ‘things’ that still urgently need to be addressed in Western women’s lives, but from attachments to different geo-political feminist states, which it can only ‘see’ in its own false image. Writing the grand narrative of independence Western feminism refuses to speak in any language other than its own. For feminism not to appear exclusively in its Western form or image it needs to be an open rather than a closed ‘text’ of differently located feminisms. Rather than feminist ‘independence’, there is a need for feminisms to be in dialogue with each other, in ways that are mindful of differences but that allow for cultures of *interdependent* collaboration in the interest of future feminisms and feminist

futures (see Aston, 'Swimming in Histories of Gender Oppression', for further discussion).

In the field of feminism and theatre, to be in touch with and touched by different stages in feminism and feminist stages is to offer some sort of redress to the dominant trend in the colonial trafficking of ideas, theories and theatre practices of a Western kind. For instance, drawing on the work of the Feminist Research Working Group in the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), the essay collection *Staging International Feminisms* endeavours 'to bring differently located feminisms and theatre cultures together – beside, along side and in critical dialogue with each other, but not at the expense of each other' (Aston & Case, 4). While the collection evidences some international trafficking of Western ideas, critical practices, strategies or performance practices signalling 'the continuing primacy of UK/US feminist movements', nonetheless, 'situating that primacy alongside feminist cultures from Nigeria, India or Korea' in turn serves as a means 'of opening up more familiar forms of Western feminism and theatre to contestation and debate' (ibid).

### **CommuniTIES**

To work in IFTR's Feminist Research Working Group, 'beside' feminist-theatre scholars from differing world theatre and feminist contexts, is to be reminded of the creative and political value of working towards women's theatre and performance networks, locally and globally.

This suggests a different strategy to that which has gained some feminist currency of late: to put the emphasis of community-building on the theatrical event. For instance, Jill Dolan eloquently makes the case for the utopian possibilities that theatre itself may be able to offer of a 'better [socially progressive] future' (37); of theatre's potential to create 'temporary communities' by affective – spectators moved to feel together – means (40). Although I am drawn to this idea and agree with it in one way, at the same time this places a huge burden or emphasis on a particular show to fulfil the community-making, desire to imagine ourselves differently, tasks. Therefore, instead of charging theatre with the task of feminist community-making or relying on feminism as a movement (which is difficult in the prevailing climate of Western post-feminism) it might be possible to

conceive of a feminism and theatre movement or network that builds through meeting grounds, in which it is possible to be in touch with the work of others and to engage in the critical labour of working towards understandings of different feminist cultures and sites of feminist theatre activism. This because, as Sara Ahmed warns, a community of feminist interests cannot be taken as a given, but rather is something that has to be worked through and for together. Indeed, one of the early and valuable lessons of seventies feminism was not to assume the commonality of women's experience but to recognise the need to negotiate a complex array of differences in terms of class, ethnicities, sexualities and gender. In short, there can be no question of presuming to know others but, as Ahmed argues, of needing to get to know others: 'In the very "painstaking labour" of getting closer, of speaking *to* each other, and of working *for* each other, we also get closer to "other others". In such acts of alignment (rather than merger), we can reshape the very bodily form of the community, as a community that is yet to come' (180). Ahmed's point is crucial to minimising the risk that 'we' build a new community of strangers: one in which the hierarchies of Western feminism which positions some women as stranger than others are kept in place.

Hence, rather than think in terms of a feminism and theatre community in a monolithic sense, I have come to think of this as working towards communiTIES, the latter a term I have stolen and adapted from Patrice Pavis. 'A few single communiTIES (political, geographical, ethnical, sexual, etc.) are what Pavis laments as all that is left to us in the absence of 'THE community' (82-3). But I want to revise or adjust this view more positively to advocate differently located communiTIES as the means to community-making, to creating attachments that are mindful of the different and diverse conditions of local feminist and theatre communities, that might provide the means by which theatre women, as artists and scholars, can find political and creative 'ties' to each other, locally and globally.

Labouring towards feminism and theatre communiTIES is arguably more empowering than working in feminist isolation; advocates a mode of interdependent feminisms and theatre connections, rather than a style of independent feminism confined to Western ways of 'seeing'. In the final analysis, it is a far more hopeful response to the



question mark that hangs over the future of the 'f-word' and the relations between feminism and theatre.

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