

# Emerging Feminist Theatre

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During the post sixties era, women moved into every area of production, questioned the structure and administration of theatre organizations, the creative process that produced theatrical works, the acting theories and methods that shaped performance, and the forms that governed the spectator-spectacle relationship. Many women had started out in the experimental theatre groups of the 1960s but when these groups, ostensibly committed to radical change and ending oppression, refused to examine their own gender politics women left, taking with them their expertise. They then went on to found theatre groups of their own. Each group defined for itself what feminist meant and what feminist theatre should include. Some groups included men, some did not. While all groups felt a substantial, commitment to representing women's experience, there was no consensus as to what that meant. No single figure set the agenda and no national organisations suggested guidelines; instead, groups looked to feminists in other arenas for interaction and support. In areas where more than one theatre group existed, contact among them was important, but no more important than with other kinds of feminist groups 'After the early 1980s when the number of feminist theatre groups began to decline, women did not stop doing theatre dedicated to exploring and challenging women's situations. Some women continued to work with theatre groups, others struck out on their own with one-woman shows or writing plays to be produced by other theatres. The number of women directors, designers and administrators increased, as did the number of women teachers and critics.

In theory and criticism women also began to draw upon gender issues to find a new language through which to discuss theatre. Many of these first works were deconstructive in nature as critics identified the ways women had been oppressed or their experiences erased. Concomitantly, there was an investment in recuperating the work of women that had been elided by a male-defined history. These efforts both challenged male representations and placed women in history.

From these efforts women theorists and critics went on to suggest and identify positive strategies for resistance and change Thane strategies were positive because they did not emerge from deconstructive critiques of male works or studies of women's exclusion or victimisation. Instead, they were based on women's experiences and differences and drew upon women's work. Women in theatre reached across disciplinary boundaries to other fields, including the newly emerging theory in film, anthropology, social studies and history in order to explore how representation constructed and was constructed by women.

Despite changes in methods and approaches, there has existed since the 1960s in the United States a significant and growing body of work by women in theatre and theory that relentlessly interrogates gender and politics, while challenging and displacing traditional methods of analysis, creation and production. From the beginning gender issues questioned boundaries erected by tradition that had operated to exclude or erase women discursively and materially. One such distinction was that between the public and the private arenas, keeping women isolated from one another and without a 'public' voice. Observing how this division worked to disempower women, women writers began to ask what purpose or whose interests did the distinctions between public and private or personal and political serve? Interrogating the exclusionary relationship between the political and the personal eventually served as the basis for consciousness-

raising, a dialectical method for achieving a critical consciousness used by the feminist movement so that women might identify and change oppressive situations in their lives.

Consciousness-raising emerged from the belief that women have so naturalised and internalised their oppression that they themselves cannot identify it. In order to change this, women writers created a sequence of discussion sessions encouraging women to draw on their own lives and identify important directions for feminist thought and activism. Personal testimony was offered and interpreted in the light of political criteria. This demonstrated to women that what they had previously understood as private failings or personal problems were part of the pervasive material oppression of women. The subsequent collectivized view of experience was ended to serve as the foundation for political actions.

By proclaiming the personal political, and the political personal, women writers radically destabilised both categories and redefined them not as opposite but mutually dependent and intertwined. Politics did not end where the private sphere began, nor did the private sphere remain uninfluenced by politics. Instead, as Judith Butler summarised it, the link existed in "the recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone, and that it in turn delimits me in a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers me." (Butler 271). The recognition Butler describes originally emerged for women writers through the process of consciousness-raising, and it was this realisation that feminists carried with them as they used their political insight to change and influence all areas of their lives.

Women saw their gender concerns in dialogue with other concerns, establishing relations rather than divisions. As Janelle Reinett succinctly put it: "of course, gender study is completely interdisciplinary" (Reinett 228). Writing on the birth of New Women's History in the 1970 Carroll Smith-Rosenburg commented that the historical inquiries she and others pursued were shaped in part by the interests and awareness awakened by the feminist movement. The historical and scholarly work was interwoven with the political project, "the focus of women's history followed contemporary concerns." (Rosenburg 14). The connections were similarly made in theatre when Sue-Ellen. Case identified a "natural working alliance" among "Writers, artists, theorists, historians, critics, and social activists" (Case, Feminism 113). On the stage artists created new plays with opportunities for "women's narratives and dialogues largely denied in the history of the dominant culture". These plays worked to further challenge women's isolation by using the collective effort of theatre to present women working together and to provide opportunities for women to gather together in a communal event. Concomitantly, critics and theorists were able to "aid in consciousness-raising by accurately Identifying the psychological, cultural, and educational controls on women's consciousness and suggesting alternative modes of perception". Thus, together in related but not necessarily collaborative efforts, women began to articulate feminist methods and approaches that focused inquiries and identified crucial emphases. This work defined the intersection of feminism and theatre. Critics and theorists were responsive to the work they saw on the stage and to the interests and concerns articulated by practitioners. Practitioners could avail themselves of the existing criticism as both inspiration and critique in order to further their own efforts.

One significant line of inquiry for feminist theorists has been the exploration of the notion of the subject position and its possibilities for women. Examining the socially produced ways of being an individual allowed feminists to explore what Chris Weedon called a "whole range of discursive practices (21). This move connected with the feminist redefinition of the personal, as it called into question the naturally or biologically created self, and substituted a notion of shifting and unstable codes and approaches. Silverman offered a similar definition of the subject position as a site where the intersection of discourses is foregrounded. "It helps us to conceive of human reality as a construction, as the product of signifying activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious." (130).

Feminist definitions and deconstructions were able to reveal the specificity of the position and propose a more particular and local definition of the subject position. Women writers from the beginning worked to produce a subject position that was always conscious of its specificity and hence, its instability. "It is important to see subjectivity as always historically produced in specific discourses and never as one single fixed structure." (90).

The notion of a collective subject emerges directly from the works of women writers to erase boundaries and question divisions. As women had worked to infuse a notion of the personal with the political and thus reconstitute both categories into something new and less distinct, they also worked to articulate a way for women to work across differences towards coalition. Sue-Ellen Case saw the collective subject as particularly productive for the field of drama and performance and suggested, following Rachel Blau DuPlessis, that "a collective subject can mark a work with multiplicity rather than the old protagonist-antagonist polarization" (Case Split 129) No longer based on a system of two polar opposites, the collective subject is in motion, not settling for a singular position that would fix her within the field of representation and lock her into the very system she works to subvert. Embracing and stressing heterogeneity, as de Lauretis described the collective subject, offers the possibility for representing woman as 'as a social subject and a site of difference'. (143). The notion of a collective subject also works against the traditional view of the subject as an isolated individual. Instead, the collective subject always operating within a field that by definition includes others, and is always being defined relationally.

Concomitantly with the theoretical exploration, women theatre practitioners were also interrogating the position of women. Taking for granted that a play could centre on a woman or that it could be based on women's experience, these playwrights experimented with the bases of theatre as they revised form, content and history. They understood that there was a relationship between their material existence and their work in the theatre. In 1974 Roberta Sklar told Charlotte Rea: "Women's theater is created by women who are in a state of experiencing the fact that they are women in new ways. What they want to do as they create is share this experience with other women bringing them into a new state of awareness" (Sklar 79). For feminist theatres, the investment was in the identification and articulation of women's lived experience. Believing that until that point this experience precisely what had been elided and erased feminist theatre practitioners set out to give voice to that experience.

This feminist theatre was a significant departure from the pro-war dramatic forms. This transformation was rooted in political events as well as social and cultural ones and was engaged in interrogating, displacing, disrupting accepted art forms and political systems. Now more open, more fluid, more exploratory and perhaps even more fragmented forms began to evolve. Drama moved off the proscenium stage into cafes, basements, attics and galleries. It disrupted author-text relationship. It heightened the sense of the dramatic through confrontation and conflict. Dramatic forms and techniques thus changed, expanded, borrowed from other mediums to accommodate new concepts of reality, new theatrics of psychology and the changing form of perception. Amongst the major influences on the theatre were Antonin Artaud and Andre Breton. White Artaud stressed the need for ritual and sheer physicality of the theatre, Breton through his sheer physicality of the theatre, Breton through his surrealistic techniques hoped to achieve "A mode of experience and perception in which opposites would cease to appear contradictory and would be reconciled in a new vision and knowledge of reality" (Orenstein).

Some women writers used images and language became a powerful medium of reflecting and communicating this transformation. Space on stage was also used to depict character changes, hallucinations, dreams, trances, monologues were some other ways. Character at times obliterated itself to merge with the narrative, erasing the margins fully, allowing itself to be used for this purpose unfolding.

The theater of the sixties was a rebellion against the atrophying of human experience of the limiting and curtailing of his sensibility. It wanted to force of moment of recognition through indicating the hollow interior, the empty self and this it attempted through dismantling the main categories and concepts of theatre. The present work explores gender and social concerns and experimentation in the plays of three American women dramatists Adrienne Kennedy, Maria Irene Fornes and Megan Terry. The crucial factor in the choice of these playwrights is their constant engagement with the meaning, consequences and significance of women's subjectivity. Their plays and theoretical positions represent certain changes or shifts in women's theatre and theory over time, certain questions continued to be asked but the answers changed, the approaches differed, and the frame shifted.

One of the most provocative and least studied black American dramatists to emerge in the sixties is Adrienne Kennedy. Set in the surrealistic theatre of the mind, her dramas are rich collages of ambiguities, metaphors, poetic insights, literary references and mythic associations, all of which provide a dramatic form unique to Kennedy. Having the power of myths, her plays suggest an awareness of reality contingent upon the images that man is conditioned to expect in his culture. Moreover, they draw upon that peculiar quality of myths which enables a person to externalize his deepest feelings. Kennedy's controversial, often violent plays use symbolism to portray African-American characters whose multiple or uncertain identities reflect their struggle for self-knowledge in a white-dominated society. Although some audiences have expressed discomfort with the dark, brutal nature of Kennedy's plays, critics have consistently praised their lyricism and expressionistic structure, frequently comparing them to poetry. Wolfgang Binder observed: "These dramas are to some degree exorcizing personal and collective racial traumas and have anger, the urge to communicate and (attempted) liberation as the motivating forces." (Matuz. 201).

Kennedy grew up in a multi-ethnic, middle-class neighbourhood in Cleveland, Ohio, A gifted child, she learned to read at the age of three. Kennedy credits her mother as an early literary influence: "I really owe writing to her in a sense, because my mother is a terrific storyteller and I feel that all my writing basically has the same tone as the stories she told about her childhood. She used to tell funny stories, but they always had this terror in them, a blackness" Kennedy's memoir, *People Who Led to My Plays*, presents the diverse people and images that have influenced her writing, and conveys her early fascination with glamorous film stars, and discusses her reverence for the work of Tennessee Williams, whose play *The Glass Menagerie* first attracted her to the theater. She did not begin writing, however until she enrolled a course on twentieth-century literature at Ohio State University: "That course fired something in me. I suddenly found myself writing short stories instead of studying." Shortly after graduating, Kennedy was married, had her first child, and began writing plays while staying up late with her baby. Although her work was praised by writing instructors, she became discouraged by consistent rejections from publishers. At the age of twenty-nine, however, Kennedy travelled to West Africa, which induced a turning point in her writing: "I couldn't cling to what I had been writing it changed me so... I think, the main thing was that I discovered strength in being a black person and a connection to West Africa." (Kennedy). During this time, she also travelled to Rome, and the contrast between African and European experiences provided the background for her first play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. When Kennedy returned to the United States, she submitted the drama to a workshop taught by playwright Edward Albee. Soon afterward, the play enjoyed successful off Broadway run and won an Obie Award in 1964.

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* won praise for its innovative depiction of characters with multiple personalities. The play focuses on a young girl whose confused identity is linked with her ambiguous feelings toward her white mother and black father. Simultaneously obsessed with and alienated from Western culture, she is tormented by visions of her light-skinned mother, Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Habsburg, and Jesus Christ. Reviewers were intrigued by the use of historical figures to represent various aspects of Sarah's identity, noting Kennedy's own fascination with many personalities of European royalty. When discussing



this work, Kennedy commented: "I struggled for a long time to write plays-as typified by *Funnyhouse* in which the person is in conflict with their inner forces, with the conflicting sides to their personality, which I found to be my own particular, greatest conflict. I finally came up with this one character, Sarah, who, rather than talk to father or mother, talked with these people she created about her problems."

Kennedy's following work, *Cities in Bezique*, consists of two one-act plays). *The Owl Answers* and *A Beast Story*. Like *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. *The Owl Answers* portrays a black woman's quest for self-knowledge in a world dominated by white people. The main character is consumed by feelings of estrangement and her psyche is fragmented into several identities Throughout the play, her black, white, and mythical personalities transform and merge in a dreamlike manner until She finally appears as a lonely teacher who threatens her lover with a butcher knife, and then changes into an owl. Critics emphasized the recurring symbol of this nocturnal bird, citing its ambiguous legendary associations with death, ill fortune, the occult, quests for love, and feminine mythology. Contrasting with the multiple identities in *The Owl Answers*, *A Beast Story* presents stark characters who enact a pattern of destructive family relationships. At the opening of the play, Beast Girl's father performs her ominous wedding ceremony to Dead Human: "My father preached our wedding service and a black sun floated over the altar. A crow flew through an open window while my mother played the organ and the black sun floated "Throughout the play. Beast Girl is victimized by her family; she is stalked by her lustful father and then raped by Dead Human when she refuses his advances. Later, her parents force her to kill her child; in an apocalyptic fit of rage and despair, she murders her husband as well. Kimberly W. Benston observed: "*A Beast Story* deals with the impossibility of maintaining a dream untarnished-specifically, the Dream of identity achieved through love amid the corruption which is life. The play is unrelentingly melancholy-we have sublimations and deaths, tiredness and disillusion, frustration and disenchantment." Other 'critically acclaimed works by Kennedy include the lesser-known *A Rat's Mass* and *Lesson in a Dead Language*, which portray worlds of surrealistically distorted religion, focusing on the loss of childhood innocence through sexual initiation rites. *Sun: A Poem for Malcolm X Inspired by His Murder*, a short play about creation.

Maria Irene Fornes is a Cuba-born American dramatist. She is among the pioneering avant-garde dramatists who created the off-off-Broadway forum during the 1960s. Unlike most of her contemporaries, she continued working in small, non-commercially oriented theaters for over twenty-five years. In 1972, Fornes helped to found the New York the after Strategy an organization that produced the work of experimental American playwrights-and served in various roles, from bookkeeper to president, until the league dissolved in 1979. Fornes's works have earned her an unprecedented seven Obie Awards, the highest recognition for off Broadway productions, a tribute to her dedication to the non- Broadway theater. Her 1982 Obie was a commendation for sustained achievement. Despite her accomplishments, Fornes has not received significant public attention. Her plays are neither widely reviewed nor have they been subject to numerous interpretations, perhaps because critics are unable to categorize Fornes's constantly evolving, experimental style. Fellow dramatist Wilson commented: "She's one of the very, very best-it's a shame she's always been performed in such obscurity. Her work has no precedents, it isn't derived from anything. She's the most original of us all."

She began a career as a painter but decided to devote her life to playwriting after attending Roger Blin's 1954 Paris production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Of the performance, Fornes said: "I didn't know a word of French. I had not read the play in English. But what was happening in front of me had a profound impact without even understanding a word. Imagine a writer whose theatricality is so amazing and so important that you could see a Play of his, not understand one word, and be shook up. When I left that theater I felt that my life was changed, that I was seeing everything with a different clarity." (Fornes 30). The surrealistic elements of Beckett's writing influenced Fornes's early plays, which are unconventional in their structure, dialogue, and staging. Eschewing plot and character development, her

works often explore emotions in human relationships through symbolism rather than realism, and at times contain both brutality and slapstick humor. Critics praise Fornes for her subtle social criticism and economy of style. Susan Sontag asserted, "Fornes has a near faultless ear for the ruses of egotism and cruelty. Unlike most contemporary dramatists, for whom psychological brutality is the principal, inexhaustible subject, Fornes is never in complicity with the brutality she depicts." Sontag added: "[Her] work has always been intelligent often funny, never vulgar or cynical; both delicate and visceral."

In her first important play, *Tango Palace*, Fornes presents ill-fated male lovers who enact such roles as father-son and teacher-pupil. They gradually become engaged in a metaphysical power struggle that intimately ends in murder. The *Successful Life of 3: A Skit for Vaudeville*, a romantic spoof for which Fornes received her first Obie Award, features characters named He, She, and 3, who meet in a doctor's office and become involved in a love triangle. Their archetypal relationship is delineated through a series of short, unrelated sketches in which the sense of disconnection helps explain the dynamics of their love. Bonnie Marranca commented: "*The Successful Life of 3*" represents Fornes at her comic best. This beautifully orchestrated piece, with its crisp, precise dialogue, peculiar internal logic, and short, cinematic takes is a wonderful display of comic anarchy." (71).

Fornes's next Obie Award-winning play, *Promenade*, contains perhaps her strongest social criticism. In this comedy of manners, two guileless, lower-class prisoners, 105 and 106, escape from their jail cell in quest of the evil they know to exist in the world, but have never seen. Their flight leads them to direct confrontation with the wealthy for the first time, and 105 and 106 learn that the rich are cruel, while the poor are "rich" in spirit and kindness. However, unable to pinpoint evil because they cannot identify it, the uncorrupted prisoners willingly return to the "freedom" of their cell. Another of Fornes' favourite satirical targets is popular culture, and she often employs ironic reversal to illustrate the influence it has on the American psyche. In *Molly's Dream*, for example, a waitress falls asleep on the job and dreams herself into melodramatic movies of the 1940s. Fornes parodies and mocks the romantic conventions of the era, as Molly refuses to break into song when music swells dramatically and she interrupts a torch song about abusive love to explain the implausibility of the situation in her actual life.

*Fefu and Her Friends* marks a change for Fornes to a somewhat more conventional approach to drama. With this pivotal work, Fornes begins to emphasize realistic, three-dimensional characters rather than symbolic and surreal action. The play revolves around eight female friends who have gathered at a New England country home for a reunion weekend in 1935. Wrought with tension, however, the characters eventually become violent, and their frenzy culminates. Innovative staging highlights this Obie Award-winner, which a critic described as "a mature play, ripe with nuance and mystery." Scenes in Act II take place in different rooms simultaneously; the audience, which is split into groups, physically moves from room to room. Several critics believe that the play's action, viewed in no particular sequence, stresses the redundant lives of women in a chauvinistic society. Through a blend of quick humor and stream-of-consciousness dialogue, Fornes illuminates the concerns and social ills of the Depression era from a female perspective. *Mud*, also grounded in realism, is set on an Appalachia farm, where Mae, her husband Lloyd, and Henry, who becomes Mae's lover after her husband is accidentally crippled, live in gloom and ignorance. After Mae learns that knowledge and communication are the keys to power, she prepares to leave; stifling farm, but the inarticulate Lloyd kills her.

Fornes treats the themes of sexual politics and the failure of communication in other plays as well centres upon Paul and Eve, whose difficulty communicating is punctuated by the broadcasting of a foreign language instruction tape following each argument.) The title character in *Sarita* is an adolescent Cuban girl from the South Bronx who harbours a self-destructive, unrequited love for a young man. Confused by contradicting Cuban and American values and unable to stay away from the boy, Santa ultimately stabs

him to death. *The Conduct of Life*, an Obie Award-winning play, focuses on the personal and sexual life of Orlando, a Latin American soldier whose duty is torturing prisoners for his military government. Rather than showing the audience the particulars of the captain's job, Fornes conveys his heartless temperament by depicting his violent relationship with his wife, whom he harasses and ridicules, and his twelve-year-old female servant, whom he rapes and enslaves. Through the link between Orlando's private and public lives, Fornes comments on the brutality of political oppression. *The Conduct of Life* received critical praise for its avoidance of didacticism and for its strong theatrical impact. Another Obie Award winning play, *Abingdon Square*, is set in New York City in 1905 and conveys the sense of stagnation felt by Marion, a fifteen-year-old girl married to a middle-aged man. Marion escapes her confining world through sexual fantasies. When a young man helps her discover her true self, she begins to acknowledge the importance of her own needs and desires. The work of no other contemporary American playwright can boast the extraordinary scope of that of Megan Terry. In the course of over thirty years her collected plays have become a virtual compendium of the styles of modern drama, ranging from collaborative ensemble work to performance art to naturalism. After training at the Seattle Repertory Playhouse, the University of Alberta and Yale University, she moved to New York, where in 1963 she became a cofounder of the Open Theater. During the next ten years, working closely with Joseph Chaikin, she was instrumental in effecting the open Theater's break with psychological realism and in developing their distinctive and influential ensemble work. In 1966 she wrote *Viet Rock*, the first rock musical, which premiered at La Marna, has been performed world-wide and was presented again in New York in 1987. During the late sixties and early seventies she continued to write for the Open Theater and became a founding member of the New York Theatre Strategy. In 1974 she moved to Omaha where she lived, as playwright-in-residence at the Omaha Theatre. In recent years she has continued to develop and refine the style of her early work while experimenting with ever more diverse forms techniques.

Despite the eclecticism of Terry's work, it remains unified by a particular dramatic technique-the rapid transformation of one character into another-and a deep political commitment. Her early transformational plays including *Calm Down Mother*, for three women, and *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool, Dry Place*, for three men (both written for the Open Theater 1965)- examine the operation of sex roles, both psychologically and sociologically. Both are comprised of a series of linked sketches that gives the audience opportunity to observe the connection between a succession of female and male roles and situations. Both provide actors the chance to explore a number of different characters, theatrical styles and kinds of social interaction.

In her transformational plays Terry challenges the hegemony of the consciousness of the intractable individual that had so dominated American drama in the 1950s. Instead, her work insistently throws the spectator's focus onto society and the way it maintains oppressive roles and attitudes. Her more recent plays continue the investigation, using multiple series of transformations and focusing more urgently on the origin of exploitative formations. These include *Babes in the Bighouse* (1974), which explores the symbiotic relationships between prisoners, guards and wardens in a woman's prison; *American King's English for Queens* (1978), which examines language's crucial role in the development of sexist attitudes and stereotypes; and *Goona Goona* (1979), which uses a Grand Guignol style to investigate American family violence.

Another important facet of Terry's work has been the study of strong women from history whom she holds up as an inspiration for modern Americans. In *Approaching Simone* (1970) she dramatizes the life of the French philosopher, theologian and educator Simone Weil, using a style closer to that of a Christian Passion play than to her early transformational work. She strings together scenes from Simone's life to document the development of her political and spiritual beliefs and to create, in opposition to the patriarchal Judeo-Christian mythology on which Simone was raised, a kind of counter mythology-female,

pacifist, nurturing and strong. In *Mollie Bailey's Traveling Family Circus: Featuring Scenes from the Life of Mother Jones* (1985) Terry juxtaposes the extraordinary generosity of Mollie Bailey as circus manager, wife and mother against the struggle of Mother Jones for mine workers' rights. Structured upon these two parallel and interwoven stories, the play demonstrates that women have-and can still become successful without sacrificing themselves to competitiveness and greed.

As Terry explains in the interview, she is less interested in a carefully developed unbroken plot than in associative connections, in multiple actions, in brief scenes linked together and peopled by panoply of characters. Despite this, however, she has written naturalistic, highly plotted work, most notably her 1974 play *Hothouse*. In it she focuses on the process of emotional growth by portraying three generations of women living in one house and their relationships with various husbands and lovers. Although Terry uses elements of the well-made play, the final resolution depends less on the characters' revelations about the past than on the three women's understanding of their likeness and community and their recognition that the flowering of the individual must be based on self-reliance and love.

With more than sixty plays to her credit, Megan Terry remains a key figure in the development of the American alternative theatre. Beginning with her earliest work, she has devised a politically and socially activist theatre, a diversity of non-realistic forms to challenge a culture which has systematically disparaged nonlinear drama. She has introduced contentious subject matter into the American musical. She has written documentary dramas on important and troubling issues. And more, arguably, than any of her contemporaries and during a period when it has no longer been fashionable. She has kept alive the techniques of the theatre of the 1960s, renovating the spirit of that turbulent decade: "Live your life as if the revolution had been a success."

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