

For special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* on Contemporary Feminisms and Performance

Editorial: Feminisms Now

Sarah Gorman, Geraldine Harris & Jen Harvie (2018)

‘Feminisms Now’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 28:3,

278-284, DOI: 10.1080/10486801.2018.1487192

Framing Feminisms

This special issue on feminisms and performance responds to a significant resurgence and renewal of interest in feminism in Britain, the US and many other countries worldwide over the last five years. As the fault lines in neoliberal capitalism have increasingly been revealed as gaping divides, women have been taking to the streets to fight battles that ‘post-feminism’ of the 1990s and early 2000s once declared as ‘won’. In 2016, women in Poland declared a one-day women’s strike to protest against proposed changes to the legislation around abortion, while in Iceland women staged a one-day mass walkout from work as part of the ongoing (worldwide) battle for equal pay. January 2017 saw women in China, India, Australia, Germany, Canada, the UK, the US and elsewhere taking to the streets in unprecedented numbers to protest against the election of ‘pussy-grabbing’ Donald Trump and the values he represents. In October 2017 in the wake of public revelations about US film producer Harvey Weinstein, countless women in the US and UK called out deep-rooted cultures of sexual harassment in the workplace using the hashtag ‘MeToo’.

The social media networks that enabled these and other recent examples of feminist activism, such as One Billion Rising, Slutwalks, Everyday Sexism, and Daughters of Eve, have also facilitated flourishing political debate. By 2010 academic feminist discourse had already been re-vitalised by (re)engagement with the concept of intersectionality as theorised by figures such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill-Collins. Much-cited blog posts such as Flavia Dzodan's 'MY FEMINISM WILL BE INTERSECTIONAL OR IT WILL BE BULLSHIT' (2011)¹ have helped to popularise this concept and put it at the centre of public debate. Meanwhile, celebrities such as Lena Dunham, Beyoncé and Emily Watson have openly advocated feminism, while popular publications on feminism from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*, to Caitlin Moran's *How To Be a Woman* and Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist* have become 'best sellers'.²

After a phase of what Elaine Aston termed theatrical 'feminism fatigue',³ the same period has seen a number of widely applauded productions which explicitly engage with questions about the nature of feminism and what it means to be a feminist. In the UK these include works as diverse as Nic Green's *Cock and Bull* (2015), Karin Young's *The Awkward Squad* (2012), Project O's *O* (2012), Lauren Barri Holstein's *Splat!* (2013), and the musical version of *Made in Dagenham* (2015). Further afield, artists such as Cassils (US/Canada), Angelika Olszewska (Poland),

¹ Flavia Dzodan, 'MY FEMINISM WILL BE INTERSECTIONAL OR IT WILL BE BULLSHIT!', *Tiger Beatdown*, 10 October 2011, <http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/> [accessed 29 June 2017].

² Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014); Caitlin Moran, *How To Be a Woman* (London: Ebury Press, 2012); and Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014).

³ Elaine Aston, 'Feeling the Loss of Feminism: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and an Experiential Genealogy of Contemporary Women's Playwriting', *Theatre Journal* 62.4 (2010), 575-91.

Yael Farber (South Africa), Split Britches (UK/US), Young Jean Lee (US), Moira Finucane (Australia), and Nehad Selaiha (Egypt), to name but a few, have given voice to their sense of injustice about the proliferation of subjugation and oppression normalised by heteronormative patriarchal ideology.

This therefore seems a crucial moment to take stock of the current role and influence of feminism in theatre and performance internationally, and to consider how, as contemporary scholars and artists, we might respond to the challenges and opportunities represented by the resurgence of interest in feminist politics.

Curatorial Approach

This special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* was also prompted by the symposium convened by EDITOR ONE at Roehampton University in September 2015, at which both EDITOR TWO and EDITOR THREE spoke, 'Congruence and Contestation: Contemporary Feminism and Performance'. The call for papers extended an invitation to 'take stock of current performance activity in the UK and abroad and consider how we theorise "feminism" and "performance" as contemporary scholars.'⁴ The day produced reflections about the inadequacy of the term 'feminist' for non-white artists and scholars, the need for intergenerational dialogue and resource-sharing, and a renewed recognition of the value of creating space and time for women to come together to reflect upon their experiences. Following that event, our initial call for papers for this special issue produced an

⁴ See EDITOR ONE, 'Congruence and Contestation: Contemporary Feminism and Performance', *readingasawoman*, 28 May 2015, <https://readingasawoman.wordpress.com/2015/05/28/congruence-and-contestation-contemporary-feminism-and-performance-call-for-papers/> [accessed 29 June 2017].

overwhelming response of around 100 proposals. The difficulty we had in choosing between so many exciting proposals is reflected in the fact that this is almost a triple-length issue of *CTR*. We are grateful to the many people who proposed articles for this issue; thank you.

To make our final selection of proposals, we started from an ideal of 'inclusivity'. Reflecting this, articles in this issue have been authored by scholars at various career stages and they discuss drama, theatre, performance, and performance-led art created by artists working in a range of countries and of different ethnicities, gender identities, sexualities and ages. Nevertheless, the proposals we received were overwhelmingly dominated by submissions from white scholars based in the UK followed by North America, and as a result, while the performance and art work represented in this issue is from North, South and Central America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, we have to acknowledge a geographical emphasis on the UK – although always with a keen eye towards intersectional politics.

The call for contributions suggested that submissions might address the following areas: (a) theories ('intersectionality', transnational feminisms, national feminisms); (b) histories (waves/generations); (c) aesthetics (new forms, popular forms, intermedial forms); and (d) activism (Slut Walks, Femen, One Billion Rising, Daughters of Eve). As with any attempt at categorisation, this one produced significant overlaps, and most of the articles gathered here could easily be placed under two or more of these headings. Because of these overlaps, and in order not to shoehorn the articles into categories that felt potentially more limiting than enabling, we have not used any categories to structure the issue. Instead, we have taken the decision to draw out some of the many possible connections between pieces in this

introduction, and thereafter, in the spirit of 1970s feminist resistance to hierarchy, simply to order the articles alphabetically according to author surname.

The Articles

Importantly in a special edition about feminism, several authors have foregrounded the historical and enduring failure of white-dominated feminism in the global North to mark its own privileged positionality. In her analysis of performances by Chuma Sopotela and Mamela Nyamza, Yvette Hutchison points out that ‘many African women prefer to speak of “African feminism” or ‘Africana womanism’ rather than feminism.’⁵ Sarah French frames her article with a warning from Audre Lorde about the dangers of ignoring racial differences within feminism; and although Caoimhe Mader McGuinness explores the possibilities for feminist solidarity, she stresses the importance of ‘working from a place of difference’.⁶ In her discussion of debbie tucker green’s *hang* Trish Reid draws upon black feminist traditions ‘to trouble, among other things, assumptions about gender construction that underwrite much white feminist criticism’.⁷

A number of articles pay attention to intergenerational relationships and work carried out in the present to attend to injustices customarily relegated to history. Jen Harvie’s ‘Boom! Adversarial Ageism, Chrononormativity, and the Anthropocene’ considers representations of age and time in Split Britches’s *Ruff* (2012) and Caryl

⁵ Hutchison, Yvette, ‘Aesthetics of South African Women’s Embodied Activism: Staging Complicity’, in this issue, **page ref**

⁶ Mader McGuinness, Caoimhe, ‘Performing Solidarity: Affirmation, Difference and Debility in Project O’s *SWAGGA*’, in this issue, **page ref**.

⁷ Reid, Trish, “*killing joy as a world making project*”: Anger in the Work of debbie tucker green’, in this issue, **page ref**.

Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016), emphasising the importance of intergenerational interdependence to complicate increasingly normative understandings that resources are becoming evermore limited, and that the young and old must inevitably compete for them. Not surprisingly, considering her long and distinguished contribution to the field, several other articles reference Churchill or explore her work. This includes Trish Reid in her essay on Debbie Tucker Green whose political commitment and innovative use of form provokes a comparison and also Elaine Aston in 'Enter Stage Left: "Recognition", "Redistribution" and the A-Affect' where she considers a 'return' to socialist feminism on stage. For Aston, both Laura Wade's adaptation of Sarah Waters's novel *Tipping the Velvet* (2015) and Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) critique attempts by neoliberal governments to insist that they are committed to social mobility whilst simultaneously dismantling the welfare state and limiting access to education and training. Aston argues for a 'Brechtian-inflected reprise' – the 'A-affect' – which uses moments of heightened affectivity to draw attention to scenarios of social inequality. In her article 'British Muslim Feminism on Stage', Meenakshi Ponnuswami underlines the distinctiveness of perspectives and understandings of identity in plays by second generation British Muslim writers. The article features: Yasmin Whittaker-Khan's *Bells* (2005), Azma Dar's *Chaos* (2005), Emteaz Hussain's *Sweet Cider* (2008), and Alia Bano's *Shades* (2009). Miriam Haughton's "'Them the Breaks'" narrates the powerful rise of feminist activism in Irish theatre under the umbrella of #WakingTheFeminists (#WTF). She depicts women's exclusion from narratives of twentieth century Irish nation formation to contextualise the crisis precipitated in 2016 by women's gross under-representation in the Abbey Theatre's programme designed as part of centenary events for the 1916 Easter Rising.

Another key theme to emerge is the pressures brought to bear upon women in different cultural contexts in the shape of societal expectations and the ways these are reflected within theatre as an institution, as Haughton and others demonstrate, and within theatre and performance criticism, as Lena Šimić suggests. Contextualising Half Straddle's work against the masculinist legacy of New York's institutional avant-garde, in 'Not "Just This Girl Theatre"', Jessica Del Vecchio analyses the company's attempts to draw on Hélène Cixous's thinking to subvert normative constructions of 'girlie femininity' as trivial and necessarily 'binary'. Examples of Half Straddle's work discussed include: *Nurses in New England* (2010), *In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL* (2011), *Seagull (Thinking of You)* (2013), and *House of Dance* (2013). Trish Reid's "killing joy as a world making project" draws on Sara Ahmed's notion of the 'feminist killjoy' (2010) to explore debbie tucker green's use of anger in her play *hang* (2015). Reid argues that tucker green 'not only challenges normative conceptions of victimhood – especially black female victimhood [...] but stages ethical dilemmas based on assumptions different than those that commonly underpin contemporary English political theatre(s)'.⁸ In 'Encountering Performing (M)Others', Lena Šimić explores and practises conceptual and artistic approaches to thinking about the maternal. Seeking to raise the profile of the maternal in contemporary feminist performance discourse, she explores how paying attention to the maternal can support understanding of relations between representation and action, and art and life, as well as vulnerability, dependence, and connective social relations. In 'Aesthetics of South African Women's Embodied Activism', Yvette Hutchison analyses Nyamza's *Hatched* (2009) and Sopotela's *Inkukhu ibeke iqanda* (2013). Situating these practitioners as part of a 'new generation of South African female performance artists', Hutchison

⁸ Ibid, page ref.

argues that they deliberately situate their work 'in their corporeality, where their bodies, skin and clothing are used as sites to contextualise histories and challenge racial and patriarchal narratives, largely outside of language'.⁹

The complex, signifying power of absent and present bodies in performance emerges across a number of other articles. In 'Feminist Performance Forensics', Natalie Alvarez and Keren Zaiontz examine performance installations by artists including Teresa Margolles and Tania El Khoury. The authors explore the artists' practices of accumulating and presenting evidence of murder and gendered violence, evidence that is often embodied. Describing this as a 'forensic' aesthetics, Alvarez and Zaiontz demonstrate how it makes public and visible violence that the state has attempted to repress, effectively holding the state to account. The ironic and playfully parodic approach taken in the show *Hot Brown Honey* (2015-16) by the Australia-based burlesque troupe of the same name, contrasts starkly with that of Margolles and El Khoury, but Sarah French similarly analyses ways in which this company holds to account a legacy of violence and repression – in this case, by Australian settler colonialism. Borrowing part of her title from Aileen Moreton-Robinson's book *Talkin' up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism* (2010), French demonstrates how this performance 'consistently rejects the white colonial gaze and instead shifts the focus to whiteness as the object of racial critique'.¹⁰ Caoimhe Mader McGuinness explores the intersectional politics and aesthetics of Project O's *SWAGGA* (2014-15) in 'Performing Solidarity'. Choreographed by Project O's Alexandrina Hemsley and Jamila Johnson-Small,

⁹ Hutchison, 'Aesthetics of South African Women's Embodied Activism', [page ref.](#)

¹⁰ French, Sarah, 'Talkin' up to the White Woman': Intersections of Race and Gender in *Hot Brown Honey*, in this issue, [page ref.](#)

whose work draws on their knowledge and experience as black British women ‘to expose some of the structural workings of racism and misogyny’,¹¹ SWAGGA’s performers were Kay Hyatt and Charlotte Cooper, ‘self-identified middle-aged fat white queer activists’.¹² Mader McGuinness explores how SWAGGA sought feminist solidarity across the differences of these makers, partly through foregrounding difficulty and pain.

Feminisms Next

Overall, we believe the articles collected in this issue emphasise affiliations and solidarities across differences – of age, ethnicity, sexuality, politics, race, maternity, class, bodies, and more. They demonstrate ongoing commitments to intersectionalism, collaboration, care, action, and to contesting all kinds of violence against women. Their authors and artists are concerned to challenge enduring hegemonies of neoliberal capitalism and of white cultures, and to acknowledge the power of affects, not least anger and rage. They demonstrate keen attention to continuing to expand feminist aesthetic strategies across media and practices, from installation, through live art, theatre, online writing projects, burlesque, music hall, activism, and dance.

The fact that these articles represent just a handful of the many proposed which this issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* has had capacity for shows the wealth, potential health, and momentum of feminist activity in theatre and performance and their criticism now. They also indicate that this activity and vivacity

¹¹ Project O, ‘About Project O’, <https://www.acontemporarystruggle.com/about> [accessed 29 June 2017].

¹² Mader McGuinness, Caoimhe, ‘Performing Solidarity: Affirmation, Difference and Debility in Project O’s SWAGGA’, in this issue, **Page ref.**

are needed. Feminism remains persistently necessary because what also endures are inequalities which feminism aims to redress, inequalities which are gendered, but also related to race, age, class, sexuality, geopolitical situation, and so much more. Feminism needs sustained, sincere commitment to intersectionalism and to honouring differences. It needs revived commitment to the socialism dedicated to dismantling the socio-economic inequalities which sustain women's oppression, while it also needs to defend against the myopia risked by dominant socialism as much as dominant feminisms. It needs to pay more attention to the profound significations of bodies, not least to recognise and respect embodied differences as well as different traditions, conventions, and commitments of signification. It needs to attend scrupulously to important articulations of feelings, especially, as seen here, legitimate anger and rage, even as it seeks joy. These are some of the tasks faced by feminist artists, critics, audiences, activists, and their allies. They require activity, innovation, attentiveness, and audacity. We think – and hope – that the articles collected here contribute to these ends.

***CTR* Backpages**

The Backpages section of this special edition of *CTR* (edited by Caridad Svich) continues to reflect our interest in feminist theatre and performance with two short articles. Katarzyna Kułakowska and Agata Łuksza write about the absence of feminist theatre in Poland until the late 1990s, and Amelia Jones reviews *Tip of Her Tongue*, a groundbreaking series of feminist performances at The Broad Museum, Los Angeles.

***Interventions* (on-line)**

The journal's online *Interventions*, published alongside this special issue and edited by Theron Schmidt, complement its focus and concerns. Like Jessica Del Vecchio, Gwendolyn Alker responds to the work of New York company Half Straddle but Alker takes a more personal tone: a number of company members were formerly students in Alker's undergraduate theatre classes, but she now finds that they have lessons to teach through their mix of pop/punk/camp/girl aesthetics. Shifting focus from the experimental to the mainstream, Clare Chandler engages with the phenomenon that is the musical *Hamilton*, interrogating the extent to which that show's progressive label extends to gender representation. Finally, Jessica Worden has created a provocation in audio form: a kind of guided meditation that positions care, compassion and vulnerability as central to a feminist value system. These pieces can be accessed at <https://www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2018/interventions-28-3/>.
