

Vassar College

Digital Window @ Vassar

Senior Capstone Projects

2019

Performing performance: the development of the actress character in dramatic literature from the early twentieth century to modernity

Altemose Rachel
Vassar College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone

Recommended Citation

Rachel, Altemose, "Performing performance: the development of the actress character in dramatic literature from the early twentieth century to modernity" (2019). *Senior Capstone Projects*. 860.
https://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/860

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Window @ Vassar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Window @ Vassar. For more information, please contact library_thesis@vassar.edu.

Performing Performance: The Development of the
Actress Character in Dramatic Literature from the
Early Twentieth Century to Modernity

Rachel Altemose

Advisor: Leslie Dunn

Term A

Introduction: Corsets, Coward, and Constructions of Gender

Actresses' identity within this [Victorian] occupational cluster was further complicated by social constructs of their sex. All Victorian women's lives were interpreted by a male-dominated culture that defined normative rules for female sexuality, activity, and intellect. Social respectability was merited as long as women met the views prescribed for their age and class, but actresses—virtually by definition—lived and worked beyond the boundaries of propriety. Victorians were deeply suspicious of women whose livelihood depended on skills of deception and dissembling, and the circumstances of actress' work belied any pretenses to sexual naïveté, middle-class immobility, or feeble brain power.¹

In *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, Tracy C. Davis analyzes the socioeconomic position of Victorian female actresses; commenting on their unconventionality, stigmatization by society, and subversion of gender norms. Though existing within a culture of mannered behavior and enforced gender hierarchy, actresses found the loophole to enter the public, economically-driven sphere. Such was not an easy task, nor were these actresses universally and unequivocally respected once achieving ubiquitous recognition. Their subversive nature was often demonized, as “actress” became a term often synonymous with “prostitute” or “whore.”² The ease with which they disregarded social convention and “dissembled” in their theatrical work shocked Victorian sensibilities, as actresses' understanding of expression beyond the corset frightened the conservative British public. It was not until the 1890s and the introduction of chorus Gaiety Girls that the actress began garnering general acclaim and popularity. Actresses made names for themselves, as women like Marie Tempest and Katie Seymour reigned over the commodified, theatrical spectacles that were musical comedy. Still, these actresses were

¹ Tracy C. Davis, “The Socioeconomic Organization of the Theatre,” in *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 3.

² Tracy C. Davis, “The Social Dynamic and ‘Respectability,’” in *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 69.

often sexualized or “paraded” in burlesques and Edwardian “musical comedies”³ that dominated theatrical culture moving into the new century. Although they were gaining representation and acceptance into the theatrical world, Victorian actresses still found severe limitations on the roles they could play and the ways they could behave.

These questions of an actress’ agency and position in society endure even today. In the age of “#MeToo”⁴ and “Time’sUp,”⁵ actresses still face significant discrimination and sexualization in the entertainment industry. The industry is still largely “male-dominated,” and modern women are still forced to deal with, in Davis’ description, “normative rules for female sexuality.” However, there have been significant developments in the understanding and portrayal of not only women’s roles on stage, but also women’s roles in daily life. Judith Butler and other feminist theorists have specifically examined this connection between women’s theatrical and social lives, and have developed their theories with particular focus on such a relationship. Numerous dramatists have also filled their work with these questions, as male, and especially female, playwrights have utilized the theatrical form to understand the complexities of women’s gendered reality. Noël Coward and Ella Hickson are two such playwrights who, though almost a hundred years apart, both grapple with ideas of gender and theatricality during moments of significant cultural change.

³ Thomas Postlewait, “George Edwardes and Musical Comedy: The Transformation of London Theatre and Society, 1878-1914,” in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre’s History*, edited by Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 93.

⁴ “The ‘me too.’ movement was founded in 2006 to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing.” “About: History and Vision,” Me Too Movement. 2018, <https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history>.

⁵ Created in response to sexual abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein in 2018 in order to “addres[s] the systemic inequality and injustice in the workplace that [has] kept underrepresented groups from reaching their full potential.” “Home,” Time’s Up Now, 2017, <https://www.timesupnow.com/home#into-anchor>.

Though *Hay Fever* was written long before Butler and discussions of gender performance theory, both *Hay Fever* and *The Writer* engage with many of the concepts Butler raises in her *Theatre Journal* essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1988). While much of her analysis in this essay is expanded upon and occasionally contradicted in *Gender Trouble*, I was drawn to the fact that this particular essay was written for and published by a theatrical journal. It is also succinct in its definitions and discussion of performance and performativity, while still touching on many of the ideas of acting and gender seen in both plays. It is in this essay that Butler first introduced her theory of gender as a “stylized repetition of acts.”⁶ Expanding off of the general discourse on the social construction of gender, Butler introduced the performative aspects of how gender is recognized and maintained. She references Simone De Beauvoir’s discussion of gender in *Second Sex*— “an historical situation rather than a natural fact”— as a jumping off point for Butler’s own discoveries. Butler adds on to De Beauvoir with the idea that “the acts by which gender is constituted,” and thus developed as a historical situation, “bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts.”⁷ If one “become[s] a woman” as De Beauvoir explains, there must be a way in which she becomes so. Emphasizing the importance of cultural contexts for these constructions of “woman” to occur, Butler’s theory works to question compulsory heterosexuality and the so-called “natural”⁸ behaviors of both sexes. Therefore, gender is a culturally-dictated, collectively ingrained system of behaviors that are expected and, in some cases, enforced.

⁶ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

⁷ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 520.

⁸ “Performative Acts,” 524.

I found the application of this theory necessary to fully apply my own critique of gender to the multi-layered actresses of both Coward's and Hickson's texts. While neither playwright directly references Butler as an inspiration, particularly since Coward was literally unable to, their individual explorations of the performance of manners and the [un]-reality of the theatre show numerous ties to Butler's own connections between theatricality and gender construction. I found Butler's terminology helpful when analyzing Coward's and Hickson's texts, and personally discovered and recognized the more nuanced layers of both plays once I considered the characters' understandings of performativity that exists even off of the stage. These actress characters complicate Butler's conception of unacknowledged gender act repetition, since they—as actors—are privileged with a deeper understanding of how they can say 'this is just an act' even outside of the theatre. Coward and Hickson's characters are well aware that their lives exist in plays and pretending, and ultimately do possess an understanding of "theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act."⁹ As the theatrical women of *Hay Fever* and *The Writer* attempt to navigate the self-reflexive, performative worlds the playwrights have given them, they go so far as to verbalize Butler's distinction of performance and reality; that "gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed." These plays are not corroborations nor refutations of Butler's thoughts, but engage with them in a way that facilitates and challenges Butler's hope to denaturalize "natural" performances of gender. These actress characters are not afraid to "perfor[m] [their] gender wrong" and experience the resulting "punishments"¹⁰ for doing so. As dramatic texts, *Hay Fever* and *The Writer* fully subscribe to theatricality as a tool for the understanding of not only gender

⁹ Butler, "Performative Acts," 527.

¹⁰ "Performative Acts," 528.

constructs, but also the systems upholding constructions of reality and unreality.

Noël Coward rose to prominence in the late 1910s and early 1920s in the midst of women's suffrage and a theatrical focus on the "New Woman." He embraced the frivolity and glamour of the Jazz Age, generating a flamboyant public image in a manner similar to Oscar Wilde in the 1890s. Coward reveled in the atmosphere of his time and incorporated such an environment into his work, imbuing his female characters with an independence and disregard for Victorian societal norms. *The New Woman*, a play written by Sydney Grundy in 1894, had significantly inspired dramatists moving into the new century, with playwrights like George Bernard Shaw in England and Henrik Ibsen in Denmark representing suffragettes and working women on the stage. These plays featured female characters who "crossed conventional boundaries" and were not "dependent on either father, husband, or brother."¹¹ The actresses who played these New Woman roles "were themselves, in many ways, New Women. Simply by working they were transgressing the social boundaries that required middle-class women to be dependent." Coward similarly created these types of women in his comedy of "bad" manners—one of whom is a retired actress named Judith Bliss. Coward's first significant work, *Hay Fever* (1924-5), revolves around a theatrical family who has invited multiple house guests to their country home for the weekend. What ensues is Coward's exploration of performance, reality, and the artificiality of British manners. Here, the actress is also the matriarch; breeding her own family of performers who are not limited to the stage, but who acknowledge the performative nature of their daily existence.

It is now 2018, and yet the same questions are being asked in Ella Hickson's freshly premiered work, *The Writer*. According to Hickson, the main aim of her work is to overthrow

¹¹ Viv Gardner, "Introduction," in *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, edited by Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1992), 3.

all conventional dramatic structure in order to create a definitively feminine theatrical form. Nearly ninety-three years after Coward's work, Hickson similarly utilizes the actress and the actress' understanding of performance as tools for examining contemporary gender and social politics. In the era of "Time'sUp," Hickson's play does away with tradition as she endeavors to expand the definition of character, actress, playwright, and woman. With unnamed characters that take on positions such as "The Writer," "Female Actor," and "Director," Hickson allows the actresses playing the roles to seamlessly adopt multiple identities where women can be "both mothers and both children"¹² or whomever they choose. The actress is no longer just the actress, as Hickson's female playwright character, "The Writer," constructs the world around her with full awareness of the conventions she is adopting or casting off. The Writer (the playwright character) expands questions of how to write female characters into questions of how to write the roles in her own life; realizing that she is nothing more than an actress playing the mother, playing the Female Actor, playing the Girlfriend, or playing the Writer. While Hickson is often successful in her literal dismantling of theatrical foundations, her ultimate proposal to return to the primitive and primal sense of femininity shared in all womanhood is somewhat questionable. Although not near perfect in execution, Hickson's play is a product of the present and a direct reflection of recent feminist theory, as well as the development of the actress and woman seen in *Hay Fever*.

Both Coward's and Hickson's works directly and successfully engage with their cultural contexts in a manner that questions the gendered foundation their societies are built on. The audience member is never allowed to forget that these actresses are playing themselves, as the characters are not afraid to question the role they have been assigned

¹² Ella Hickson, *The Writer*, (London: NHB, 2018), 35.

within their own theatrical occupation or within the fictive world of their respective plays. Butler's work and focus on performance thus gives new insight and depth into ways the audience member can interpret and challenge both pieces; ultimately providing a basis and lens of reference for my own analysis. Though nearly one hundred years apart, each play is profound in its own right; making statements that significantly contribute to the actress' position in modern-day England.

Chapter One: Judith Bliss as the Capital M “Mother” of Noël Coward’s *Hay Fever*

The transition from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century spawned a new development in the conception of the female actress. With an increased focus on the New Woman both on stage and in the burgeoning suffragette movements, acting gained a certain level of professionalism as a viable and appropriate profession for women. It is within this time frame that the actress began to alter her reputation from “social pariah” to “trendsetter”¹³ as a modernizing public embraced the actress not as an example of debased womanhood, but as an inspiring and celebrated example of a working woman. The act of traversing the boundary between public and private¹⁴ also began losing its associations with depravity, opening up more opportunities for women to adopt occupations or culturally-defined attributes of either sphere. Women, as well as men, wished to “be in motion” as prevailing social codes of decorum started deteriorating.¹⁵ Although the quest for some type of equality had just begun, women welcomed any role that was newly accessible.

It is in this social atmosphere of flappers and suffrage that Noël Coward finds himself as a dramatist— using his works to “mock” conventional love and upper-class behavior while “confus[ing] the distinction between sincerity and manners in emotion.”¹⁶ His disregard of mannered norms and admiration of subversive social behavior thus enamored him of the working actress; inspiring many of his characters. While he was raised as a member of a “Good Family”¹⁷ of gentlemen and gentlewomen, Coward’s family was also theatrical. Beginning his acting career at a young age, Coward soon began collaborating with fellow

¹³ Marlis Schweitzer, “‘The Mad Search for Beauty’: Actresses’ Testimonials, the Cosmetics Industry, and the ‘Democratization of Beauty,’” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 4, no. 3 (2005): 265.

¹⁴ Davis, “The Social Dynamic and ‘Respectability,’” 69.

¹⁵ John Lahr, “Comedies of Bad Manners,” in *Coward the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1982), 39.

¹⁶ Alan Sinfield, “Private Lives/Public Theater: Noel Coward and the Politics of Homosexual Representation,” *Representations*, no. 36 (1991): 47.

¹⁷ Noël Coward, *Present Indicative: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1947), 4.

actors on music, short plays, and stories. Though unsuccessful in his individual attempts at playwrighting at first, he gained significant notoriety for his 1924 work, *The Vortex*, in which he played a leading role. His following work, *Hay Fever* (1925), firmly established Coward as a notable dramatic presence and innovator of the English comedy of manners.

While Wilde and his contemporaries reintroduced the comedy of manners into the theatrical scene of the late nineteenth century, it was not until Coward's work in the 1920s that the genre achieved a deeper level of satirical critique. A comedy of manners, according to David L. Hirst, focuses on "the way people behave, the manners they employ in a social context" with a distinctive style of "raw emotional expression and action in the subtlety of wit and intrigue."¹⁸ The comedy of manners is commonly used as a "subversive" dramatic form, used to critique societal boundaries and constructs through satire and subversions of common morality. Recognizing society's recent "democratic destruction of all social barriers," Coward took hold of the genre in an effort to bring the "stage up to date with modern life."¹⁹ Consequently, he created characters who abandoned common manners and social form in favor of "bad manners;" ultimately creating his own dramatic form, the "comedy of bad manners."²⁰ Coward's new form spoke to the young, rambunctious socialites of the 1920s whose lives were filled with artifice, promiscuity, and a general abandonment of expected social behavior. It was with the comedy of manners and its focus on social convention that Coward was able to make his most poignant discoveries regarding society's basic "design for living"²¹—breaking down this supposed "design" to its fundamental requirements and critiquing English manners and their performative aspects on a

¹⁸ David L. Hirst, *Comedy of Manners, The Critical Idiom* 40 (London: Methuen, 1979), 1.

¹⁹ Lahr, "Comedies of Bad Manners," 39-40.

²⁰ "Comedies of Bad Manners," 60.

²¹ "Comedies of Bad Manners," 116.

foundational level. He particularly plays with the divide between theatrical artifice and reality in *Hay Fever*, as Coward's thoroughly performative characters are grounded in his observance and mimicry of the social "mores"²² of the 1920s.

It was on a trip to America that Coward was first introduced to prominent American actress Laurette Taylor.²³ After watching Taylor navigate these societal "mores" in her life as a celebrated actress, wife, and mother, Coward was inspired to create the female protagonist of *Hay Fever*, Judith Bliss. Coward found Taylor's "blunt[ness] to the point of embarrassment" fascinating, and her ability to be simultaneously "naïve, intolerant, lovable, and entirely devoid of tact" enthralling.²⁴ He thanked "Fate" for his chance to observe Taylor's family as a houseguest, claiming that it was "inevitable that someone should eventually utilize portions of this eccentricity in a play," and feeling grateful that he was the first to chronicle such unconventionality.²⁵ *Hay Fever* aims to emulate such a family dynamic where public theatricality collides with domestic family life. It is through this work that Coward begins to question the foundations of social behavior English society has clung to and still holds on to. With the Bliss household, Coward creates a type of comedic "second world"²⁶ where performativity and insincerity are not only acceptable, but also outshine the more conservative house guests visiting the Bliss family for the weekend.

Hay Fever focuses on the lives of the Bliss family and one of their uproarious weekends in the English countryside. Judith Bliss, a retired actress and mother, quite literally "acts" as the head of the household and spends much of the play discussing her planned

²² Lahr, "Comedies of Bad Manners," 60.

²³ Jacqui Russell, "Chronology," in *Noël Coward Collected Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1999), xxvii.

²⁴ Coward, *Present Indicative*, 135.

²⁵ *Present Indicative*, 136.

²⁶ Alexander Leggatt, *English Stage Comedy 1490-1990: Five Centuries of a Genre* (London: Routledge, 1998), 82.

return to the stage. Her husband, David, and her grown children, Simon and Sorel, are no less theatrical, as they revel in Judith's performative nature— even acting out scenes from the play Judith wishes to revive, *Love's Whirlwind*. The characters soon realize that they have each unknowingly invited an unusual houseguest for the weekend, a particularly tricky situation when there is only one guest room. What unfolds is a battle between the conventional and the artistic, as the Blissess' guests must constantly try to locate themselves within a household of performance, “bad” manners, and bohemian unconventionality. Forced to endure a weekend of dramatic games, mismatched coupling, and familial uproar, the guests decide that the only course of action is to sneak away before the Blissess have registered the guests' departure. While in essence a plotless play, *Hay Fever* successfully tests the levels of artifice embedded in social behavior when the lines between performance, the natural, and the “English manner” are blurred.

Hay Fever is, therefore, where the divide between private and public is truly tested with Coward's creation of his theatrical “Actress-Mother.” While some late nineteenth-century works began to damage the arbitrary divide between conservative society woman and supposedly corrupt working actress, *Hay Fever* questions all established definition of what constitutes the domestic, maternal female. Judith Bliss, though a retired actress and a celebrity of the stage, is only presented in relation to her family. However, her familial surroundings do not disallow or prohibit performance from Judith or the rest of her artistically-minded household. What Coward creates is a significantly unique situation; one in which the high-society mother and wage-earning, sensual actress are not opposed individuals, but opposed, or at times harmonious, identities within a single female body. Judith constantly exhibits stereotypical qualities and characteristics of both the country

mother and modern stage celebrity as she tries to locate her larger-than-life personality within an entirely domestic atmosphere. The Victorian battle between the traditional and modern woman is not ended, but merely condensed to a battle within one woman attempting to take on the gender roles the present is offering her.

“Mother” Judith: A Public Woman in Private

From the opening stage direction describing Judith Bliss’ house as “*very comfortable and extremely untidy*,” it is clear that Judith does not subscribe to the traditional motherly role of housekeeper. Although Judith is a mother in the literal sense of possessing two children, Coward explores how a maternal instinct is not necessarily ingrained or fundamental, but simply one of the “roles” in the all-encompassing nature of Judith’s performativity. Coward plays with social role and gender role in a manner akin to Butler’s discussions of gender performativity. Butler describes socially-constructed gender identity as a “performative accomplishment” of “the stylized repetition of acts through time.”²⁷ Judith as an actress, however, is quite conscious of these particular “acts” that come to represent femininity and masculinity or, in her case, maternity. In an attempt to gain authority and sympathy from her children, Judith places Simon and Sorel’s heads on her shoulders to make “*a charming little motherly picture*.”²⁸ Coward thus incorporates Butler’s focus on gesture with gender identity, as even Coward’s stage directions emphasize how Judith’s maternal nature is constructed through contrived moments and Judith’s own idea of motherly gestures. When Sorel laments the fact that she still lives with her parents, or when Simon comes to announce his engagement, Judith again makes “*picturesque*” motherly replies:

²⁷ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 520.

²⁸ Noël Coward, *Hay Fever*, in *Noël Coward Collected Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1999), 14.

“(picturesquely) All my chicks leaving the nest!”²⁹ Coward is not subtle in his reference to artifice and role-playing when it comes to Judith’s maternity. Judith’s dialogue and physicality add multiple layers to her already performative nature, as she adopts society’s gendered scripts intentionally. Judith’s skill is mimicry, and she uses her acting talent to essentially reinvent herself not only in roles on the stage, but in roles of life. As John Lahr observes in *Coward the Playwright*, Judith spends the majority of the play “creat[ing] scenes in which she is the set piece;” constantly “watch[ing] herself do the motherly thing.”³⁰

Therefore, when actress and domestic mother come face-to-face, it is Judith’s theatrical sensibility that triumphs. Despite Coward’s somewhat progressive recognition that feminine identity is performative and that maternal or domestic roles are not intrinsic parts of womanhood, he does continue to promote a certain dichotomy of female identity. As a performative woman, Judith is unable to access any “natural” aspect of selfhood. Since she is largely defined as “actress,” such a level of performance must obviously and instinctively pervade all other aspects of her identity. Continuing with the Victorian sentiment that actresses or “Painted Ladies” are inherently “false,”³¹ Coward risks promoting the bias that the actress is incapable of anything but acting or presenting herself only through the multiple roles she plays. This then opens the question whether Judith is meant to dismantle women’s assigned roles at the beginning of the twentieth century, or whether she, in her inability to access a deeper sense of self or an acceptance of her multiple identities, upholds a somewhat negative depiction of women as limited or one-dimensional. However, Coward’s attention to the comedy of manners and societal artifice generalizes Judith’s superficiality and applies it

²⁹ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 55.

³⁰ Lahr, “Comedies of Bad Manners,” 47-8.

³¹ Schweitzer, “The Mad Search for Beauty,” 262.

to society at large. Judith and her family members are the characters who hold the most authority throughout the play, and they are also the characters who have a larger understanding of the social roles they are intended to play. Although Coward does not give Judith a freedom to choose her roles nor multiple roles to choose from, he does privilege her with the knowledge that she is playing a role in the first place.

Such knowledge is additionally reflected in Sorel and Simon. While Judith may not be a mother in the traditional sense, she has still played a part in Simon and Sorel's upbringing. With an "Actress-Mother," Judith's family cannot help but imitate the performative aspects Judith brings to her maternity. While Coward allows Judith to express both conservative and sexually-promiscuous aspects of her personality, he also upholds her motherly role as the moral and prominent guide of her children's upbringing. Judith does, however, protest such an implication; responding to her husband's accusatory "I think it would be better, Judith, if you exercised a little more influence over the children" with "That's right – blame it all on me."³² Later in the play when David again questions her motherly influence asking, "Are you content to sit here, Judith, and let your son insult me?" Judith again retorts "He's your son as well as mine."³³

In both of these instances, Coward effectively questions the role-like, stereotypical aspects of "mother." While Judith generally considers herself an actress first and mother second – especially since her role as "Mother" is little more than her performance of what she expects a mother to be – she is still culpable for any and all of her children's negative attributes. This is particularly ironic since Judith herself admits that she had little role in her children's early life, and since it is also clear that Judith has in fact exerted more than "a little

³² Coward, *Hay Fever*, 40.

³³ *Hay Fever*, 70.

influence” over what her children have become. While patting Simon’s cheek and remarking through sniffles, “When I think of you both in your perambulators... Oh dear, it makes me cry!” Sorel immediately replies, “I don’t believe you ever saw us in our perambulators”— an assertion Judith verifies, saying, “I don’t believe I did.”³⁴ Although Judith does perform what she believes is a motherly nature, she ultimately holds no real illusions concerning her actual motherly contribution. Judith recognizes and accepts her position as “Mother” rather than “mother” – adopting the title and performing the domestic role more so than the expected qualities of motherhood. When Sorel questions her, Judith is quick to admit that she was rarely around when the children were young. Judith’s response to her husband’s criticism is thus not unfounded, as he cannot truly “blame it all” on Judith when she was evidently not a primary caregiver for a significant part of her children’s lives.

On the other hand, David’s request that Judith exercise a greater influence is also questionable, as Sorel and Simon have clearly adopted their mother’s predilections towards mimicry, imitation, and theatricality. Both children jump at the opportunity to play roles in *Love’s Whirlwind*, the play Judith intends on reviving, and revel in “playing up to Mother”³⁵ the dramatics of their newfound relationships with Sandy and Jackie. What David seems to propose with his statement, then, is that Judith should impart a sense of classic morality as the wife and mother of the house. David assumes that it is Judith’s duty as mother – “the moral and spiritual guardian of her family”³⁶ – to automatically assume a sense of conventionality and to accept the domestication and motherly instinct a wife must naturally possess. Judith again challenges David and his accusations:

³⁴ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 67.

³⁵ *Hay Fever*, 47.

³⁶ Schweitzer, “The Mad Search for Beauty,” 262.

David: The atmosphere of this house is becoming more unbearable every day, and all because Simon and Sorel are allowed to do exactly what they like.

Judith: You sit upstairs all day, writing your novels.

David: Novels which earn us our daily bread.

Judith: 'Daily bread'— nonsense! We've got enough money to keep us in comfort until we die.³⁷

Judith does not shy away from implicating David in child-rearing responsibilities and holding him partially culpable for their children's wild behavior. She recognizes that he has done little to help raise the children, and she will not ungrudgingly accept David's excuse that as the man of the house, he is responsible for working for their "daily bread." Judith is not willing to adopt the roles that are forced upon her, nor is she willing to let David play the part of "working father" when she has also significantly contributed to her family's financial stability. It upsets her that "nothing's happen[ing]"³⁸ to her anymore now that she has retired, and takes a significant amount of pride in her acting profession— more so than she does in her motherhood.

Judith's pride in her artistry, though, does not necessarily translate into praise from her children. Sorel constantly complains about her upbringing and how she so wishes she was "normal" and "a fresh, open-air girl with a passion for games."³⁹ Simon similarly explains how their "slap-dash" behavior is "not [their] fault—it's the way [they've] been brought up."⁴⁰ Unlike Sorel, Simon does not wish for a sense of conventionality that he currently lacks thanks to his mother's guidance. While having an "Actress-Mother" clearly results in a somewhat abnormal upbringing, Simon realizes that he is able to feel "free about things"⁴¹ in a way that the houseguests are not. Simon and Sorel, unlike the majority of

³⁷ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 40.

³⁸ *Hay Fever*, 40

³⁹ *Hay Fever*, 4.

⁴⁰ *Hay Fever*, 6.

⁴¹ *Hay Fever*, 11.

English society, “live in a world of art, and they understand about artifice.”⁴² Therefore, Coward explores what a working actress can bring to domesticized motherhood that English society women cannot. Judith’s unconventionality is celebrated and given authority in *Hay Fever*, and the fact that Judith and David “spent their lives cultivating their Arts and not devoting any time to ordinary conventions and manners and things” directly contributes to the family’s more comprehensive understanding of societal roles, gender, and the falsity of English manners. Sorel may wish to be a “beautifully poised” character in a classic comedy of good English manners, but what she does not realize is that Coward, through his love of “bad” manners, has given her far more freedom to act in any “manner” she wishes.

“Actress” Judith: Creating and Preserving a Domestic Stage

Judith’s fascination with and addiction to the stage has clearly not faded with the time she has spent in the country. Judith sees herself as “more dignified on the stage than in the country,”⁴³ describing the stage as her “milieu.” Where the stage was a center of debauchery and sex in the late 1800s, it is now where Judith feels the most poised and professional. She freely admits this and takes pride in it; a sentiment that clearly indicates the increasing professionalization of the theatre in the twenties. Instead, it is the domestic atmosphere in which Judith feels lost and undignified, as her personality and values clash with those expected of her in a rural, household setting. Judith also comments how she has “tried terribly hard to be ‘landed gentry,’ but without any real success.”⁴⁴ Again, Judith’s domestic existence is described as nothing more than another role Judith has tried to play, and failed at. She has tried to *be* landed gentry as if landed gentry are characterized by a very specific type

⁴² Lahr, “Comedies of Bad Manners,” 49.

⁴³ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 16.

⁴⁴ *Hay Fever*, 16.

of behavior or personality. This is particularly evident in Judith's first entrance in the show— coming into the house with “*an armful of flowers and wearing a tea-gown, a large garden hat, gauntlet gloves and galoshes.*”⁴⁵ She is fully attired in the costume of her country character. Judith cannot simply garden in her daily wear, but must look the part.

In the manner that Judith plays with scripts of motherhood and femininity, she also exposes and critiques the expected, natural behavior and language of a stay-at-home, conservative English wife. Judith invites Sandy Tyrell for the weekend— a man significantly younger than her. However, this does not stop Judith from critiquing the sexual ploys of her family members and their invited guests. Upon hearing that Simon has invited Myra Arundel, Judith exclaims how Myra is “straining freedom to its utmost limits.” Judith goes so far as to say she “detest[s] her” considering she is “far too old” for Simon and “goes about using sex as a sort of shrimping-net.”⁴⁶ The irony is not lost on the reader or audience, as Sorel herself refers to Judith's own relations with Sandy as “undignified”—especially since Judith is an older, respectable woman. Judith does not comment on her own hypocrisy, though, and proceeds to defend herself. “I don't flaunt about,” she claims:

I never have. I've been morally an extremely nice woman all my life—more or less—and if dabbling gives me pleasure, I don't see why I shouldn't dabble.⁴⁷

With this statement, Judith simultaneously undermines what naturally constitutes an “extremely nice woman” and rejects Sorel's notion that Judith should no longer get pleasure from her dabbling simply because of her age. Judith recognizes that there are typical behaviors of “extremely nice women” that she has “more or less” adhered to throughout her life. A “nice woman” is not something Judith simply is, but is a method and system of

⁴⁵ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 7.

⁴⁶ *Hay Fever*, 11.

⁴⁷ *Hay Fever*, 10.

behavior she has taught herself. It is, in Butler's terms, a scripted behavior Judith has "rehearsed"—one that allows her to "wear certain cultural significations"⁴⁸ so that she is perceived as what culture and society have defined as a "nice woman." Judith then uses her "good" behavior as justification for her less-than-admirable affair with Sandy, stating that she can do whatever she wants since she has, in some manner, subscribed to societally-defined, morally upright behavior. Judith well knows the "vocabulary of the country house hostess"⁴⁹ and when to use it. As much as she laments her life in the country, she tells Sandy how she "always longed to leave the brittle glamour of cities and theatres and find rest in some old-world nook."⁵⁰ Coward has written Judith as deliberately contradictory; providing immense humor and a deep level of social commentary to her character. Judith does not feel a need for consistency and revels in her own variability. She loves the ability to quickly change from "what [she was] the other day" by simply donning her garden hat and accepting the conditions of the atmosphere she is currently immersed in.

When Richard kisses Judith's neck later in the play, Judith again acts coy and languishes in the dramatics of the moment: "(*dramatically*) What are we to do? What are we to do?"⁵¹ While Judith may claim how she has "trained [herself] to shun the underhand methods other women so often employ,"⁵² she has clearly not shunned manipulation entirely. As Lahr explains in *Coward the Playwright*, Judith uses this dramatic moment to "becom[e] the histrionic model of conventional response." Then, having "played the ingenue" with Richard, she "turns tragedian"⁵³ when she witnesses Sorel and Sandy kissing in the library.

⁴⁸ Butler, "Performative Acts," 525.

⁴⁹ Lahr, "Comedies of Bad Manners," 52.

⁵⁰ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 19.

⁵¹ *Hay Fever*, 44.

⁵² *Hay Fever*, 44.

⁵³ "Comedies of Bad Manners," 53.

Coward writes that Judith “*assum[es] an expression of restrained tragedy*”⁵⁴ before even opening the door to the library, thus preparing her reaction before she has actually seen Sorel and Sandy. Life for Judith is full of moment-to-moment transitions and individual scenes. It is the way she, to quote one of Coward’s stage directions, “*enjoy[s] herself*” and her theatrical world.

Judith acknowledges this separation between reality and her theatrical existence, telling Sorel how Sandy is “madly in love with me— at least, it isn’t me really, it’s my Celebrated Actress glamour.”⁵⁵ Coward’s intentional capitalization is reminiscent of and echoes Judith’s “Capital M” motherhood. Judith emanates something that is not “really me” but something larger: a “Celebrated Actress glamour.” Her recognition of her performative qualities is thus self-reflexive, as both Judith and Coward draw the reader’s and actor’s attention to the fact that Judith possesses a glamour that is not completely representative of who/what she is. However, at the same time, Judith demonstrates quite clearly throughout the play that “me” and “Celebrated Actress” are not mutually exclusive nor clearly divisible. Judith does know that the fact she is an actress is attractive, and that the roles she plays may be what Sandy is attracted to rather than what she defines as “me.” She also clearly separates her “actress” sense of self from her authentic, real sense of self. A man can be attracted to “actress” Judith and not attracted to “Mother” or “Wife” or “Countrified” Judith. Internally, she sees herself as fragmented and divided; viewing her identities not as individual parts of a larger whole but as conflicting and fractured pieces of a partitioned self.

On the other hand, Judith seems unable to separate her sense of “Celebrated Actress glamour” from her ability to operate as a single, unadulterated “me.” Butler discusses how:

⁵⁴ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 45.

⁵⁵ *Hay Fever*, 9.

[...] gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority.⁵⁶

Judith never defines herself as a singular entity or “self” unless doing so in the name of her performance. Coward makes it clear that Judith is a chameleon of personas, as she gives a passionate, energetic performance of each character she adopts. Here, Butler argues how there is no existence of an authentic, gendered self. Instead, gender, as a performative act, conceals rather than reveals the existence of some essentialized “me.” Butler succinctly describes this in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” explaining gender as “an imitation for which there is no original.”⁵⁷ There is no single “self,” but only the illusion of an original, gendered self.

Perhaps Judith, then, is more than just a pile of artificialities with no “core” identity. Perhaps she is, instead, knowledgeable that no such identity exists, and is resultingly frustrated when her family members request that she drop her “act.” After discovering Sorel and Sandy in the library, Judith spirals into a melodramatic tirade. Sorel first asks, somewhat skeptically as indicated by the italicized “*really*,” “Mother, are you *really* upset?”⁵⁸ Sorel’s first reaction to her mother’s distress is to question if it is genuine. When Judith assures her that it is, Sorel still requests, “Mother, be natural for a minute” to which Judith replies: “I don’t know what you mean, Sorel.” Coward does not give any specific directions regarding the way Judith should speak this particular line, so it is unclear if Judith is playing naïve or if she is honestly unsure what Sorel is talking about. Judith has a similar moment at the end of

⁵⁶ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 528.

⁵⁷ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, edited by Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 306.

⁵⁸ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 45.

the play where David tells her, “Don’t be theatrical” to which she answers, “I’m not theatrical— I’m wounded to the heart.”⁵⁹ Sorel anticipates that anything her mother says is subject to interpretation. Sorel knows that many of Judith’s proclaimed emotions are simply put on, and that it is difficult to distinguish whether Judith is actually reacting to a situation or if she is simply acting. Judith herself seems unsure of how to access her “natural” self, telling Sorel that she does not understand what it means for her to “be natural.” It is interesting that Sorel asks her to *be* rather than to *act* natural, as Judith seems quite capable of “acting” whatever she likes. When asked to *be* anything or to not be anything, though, Judith is at a loss. While David thinks she is being theatrical, Judith proclaims that she is anything but, and that she is genuinely “wounded to the heart.” Although Judith may think that her emotions are authentic, it is questionable if she knows what authentic emotion feels like. She may tell herself and David that what she is feeling is deep-rooted, but, as she states in the earlier scene with Sorel, she does not know what it means to be natural or to *be* anything, for that matter.

Judith has made her living convincing people of untruths. At one point, Simon tells Judith that she was “being beautiful and sad” to which she responds, “But I am beautiful and sad.” Simon then asserts, “You’re not particularly beautiful, darling, and you never were,” to which an offended Judith replies, “Never mind; I made thousands think I was.”⁶⁰ Judith has gotten by and made a career out of convincing people that the untrue is true. Evidently, she has been successful— even in convincing people that she is visually more attractive than she actually is. Therefore, it is understandable that Judith herself confuses the line between lie and truth when acting on and off the stage has so dominated the majority of her life. She

⁵⁹ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 71.

⁶⁰ *Hay Fever*, 15.

becomes so frustrated with Simon at this moment that she “*pushes Simon on the floor*” arguing that, “If I say I’m sad, I *am* sad.” While Judith is fully aware of her acting tendencies, she does not appreciate when she is challenged. Although she may put on a front, she expects others to accept and validate whatever she is “acting” as authentic and true. When contradicted or looked at in disbelief, she quite literally throws a tantrum that results in, though in a mild form only, physical violence. Judith may present herself through a variety of characters, but she still believes each of her characters is grounded in a sense of reality in some way connected with her sense of “I.” Though “Mother” Judith may be the one playing “sad and beautiful,” Judith is still the one playing it in the first place.

Judith’s dominating preoccupation with the stage is most evident in her continued obsession with age and beauty. Judith feels her life has “stagnated” here in the country and longs to return to the stage where she was youthful and celebrated. She expresses such a sentiment multiple times throughout the play; particularly in reference to Sorel, her most immediate visual representative of youthful girlhood. Sorel’s critiques of her mother’s affairs upset Judith, who claims that Sorel is not allowed to have a “monopoly of any amorous affair” just “because [she] happen[s] to be a vigorous *ingenue* of nineteen.”⁶¹ Judith not only envies Sorel’s youth, but specifically hones in on Sorel’s ability to play ingenues; something Judith can no longer do. Coward’s self-reflexive hand is also evident here, as Sorel is not only the ingenue of Judith’s theatrical mind, but is the literal ingenue character of *Hay Fever*. While Judith may continue to act young, it is quite difficult for her to look it. She regrets “dandling”⁶² Simon and Sorel in front of cameras when they were babies, as if that was the one action that solidified the fact that Judith is old enough to have children. Naturally, Judith

⁶¹ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 9.

⁶² *Hay Fever*, 9-10.

ascribes the realization of her motherhood to the visual; believing that the cameras and photos were what corroborated the fact that she is a mother. Coward makes Judith's obsession with appearance clear from her first entrance in extensive garden attire, so it is no surprise that the actress— so used to making a living off of her looks— mourns when they are gone.

Age is also the one topic of conversation Judith inevitably brings up with each of her houseguests, and is possibly the only topic that truly upsets her. When Sandy comments how it is “awfully funny you having a grown-up son and daughter at all. I can hardly believe it,” Judith “*quickly*” replies, “I was married very young.”⁶³ This interaction not only indicates Sandy's surprise that the “pathetic and brave” Judith he is so accustomed to seeing on the stage is in fact a domesticized mother, but also solidifies Judith's distaste of being viewed not just as a mother, but as old. At one point, Judith directly states, “It's awfully sad for a woman of my temperament to have a grown-up daughter [...] I have to put my pride in my pocket”⁶⁴— something that is obviously very difficult for her to do. Judith knows that she was not meant for traditional motherhood; particularly now that her daughter has grown and taken Judith's place as the pretty one of the family. Judith seems unable to put this mentality aside and love Sorel simply as her daughter. Even in the moment where she tells Sorel, “You're a darling and I adore you,” Judith finishes the compliment with, “and you're very pretty, and I'm madly jealous of you.”⁶⁵

While she spends the majority of the time denying her maturity and lamenting her maturity in comparison to Sorel, at other times Judith emphasizes her age when it is

⁶³ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 19.

⁶⁴ *Hay Fever*, 42.

⁶⁵ *Hay Fever*, 10.

conducive to her character in the moment. Upon discovering the young Sandy and Sorel in the library, Judith glances at herself in the mirror and repeats how she is “getting old, old.”⁶⁶ Again, the ingenue Sorel has usurped what was Judith’s to begin with: first Judith’s beauty, and now Judith’s young guest. Consequently, Judith accepts her position as the mature and understanding superior to the two reckless, young lovers. She embraces the fact that she is older than both of them and exaggerates it. Judith is far from “old, old,” but she realizes that the one thing she can hold over Sorel and Sandy is her age; using it to depict herself as a wise and compassionate person. Judith’s sense of performativity is so ingrained that she has learned to perform not only her gender, but also her age. She comfortably denies clear facts about how old she is and what she looks like. Therefore, the actress effectively does not leave the stage but, as Coward shows us, finds her greatest and most profound acting challenge within the confines of her own home.

An “Infuriating Set of Hypocrites:” The Performative Family

Judith’s sense of performativity and love of the stage do not end with her. She is, after all, a mother and thus a prime role model for her children. It is not surprising, then, that Simon and Sorel so willingly ask to rehearse with Judith and to play the other parts in the play Judith is reviving, *Love’s Whirlwind*. This is the first of many metatheatrical moments where the family is united quite literally through performance. Although the relationship between these characters is often contentious, the siblings and their mother put their differences aside for a moment when they are able to play other people. Simon and Sorel’s active participation in the family game of “Adverbs” is also not surprising. Sorel is just as invested in the game as her mother, as Sorel takes the reigns in explaining the game and

⁶⁶ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 46.

forcing everyone to play correctly. This also becomes a unifying moment for the family where they congratulate one another on their ability to pretend. Simon praises his mother—“Marvellous, Mother!”—for her representation of “winsomely” picking a flower, and Sorel laughingly exclaims “Oh, lovely!”⁶⁷ at her mother’s talent for acting “in the manner of the word.”

However, the family members do not completely drop their combativeness, but instead turn their argumentative energy onto their inadequate guests. The guests, already feeling uncomfortable and out of place, fail to match the “professional” talents of the Bliss family. Judith criticizes Myra’s lack of the “right intonation” to correctly perform in the manner of “winsomely,” and the entire family critiques Richard and Jackie for their inability to grasp the rules of the game. While for Judith such a party game may feel “*frightfully* easy,” the guests who are not practiced in the art of performing have a much tougher time understanding the concept of “Adverbs.” Family and guests are thus divided along this line of understanding; a line that is impossible for either group to traverse. Alan Sinfield discusses how such a separation between performative family and unknowing guest additionally shows:

[...] the split between the two audiences— between the uninitiated and those in the know. His [Coward’s] project was to construct a *knowing subculture* of privileged insiders *in defiance* of the respectable playgoer.⁶⁸

Coward again uses his form of “bad manners” to critique adherence to the “good manners” of British society. He privileges the Bliss family as the informed and dominant figures of the play; all of whom are far more aware of the artificial nature of “manners” than their

⁶⁷ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 37.

⁶⁸ Sinfield, “Private Lives/Public Theater,” 53.

“respectable” guests. They are, in Lahr’s words, a “talentocracy:”⁶⁹ valuing artistry and eccentricity over simple conformance to the mannered behaviors of high society. Sorel explains how she must “play up” to her mother because it is “a sort of unwritten law”⁷⁰ in their household. In a talentocracy run by a professional actress, performance and the ability to perform in daily life are indicative of superiority. Characteristic of comedy of manners as a genre, the “actions” of the characters are essentially “unimportant; what matters is the way they are performed.”⁷¹ To make this clear, Coward literalizes the transformation of action to performance with the family’s game of Adverbs— a game the performative family easily wins. “The Bliss credo is ‘I act, therefore I am,’” as their existence supersedes their present reality with a life that “is in a play, not in the world.”⁷²

Such heightened existence is particularly evident when the family breaks into a scene from *Love’s Whirlwind* after Richard accidentally speaks one of the lines from the show. While practicing the scene earlier, Judith mentions how one of the character’s lines in *Love’s Whirlwind* is “Is this a game?” When Richard walks in on Myra and the Blisses in an intense argument, he of course questions, “What’s happened? Is this a game?” which sends the family into a chaotic rendition of the rest of the scene from Judith’s play. Coward specifically writes how, after Richard speaks, “*Judith’s face gives a slight twitch; then, with a meaning look at Sorel and Simon, she answers him*”⁷³ not legitimately, but with the following line from *Love’s Whirlwind*: “Yes, and a game that must be played to the finish!” However, to Judith, her response is legitimate and valid. She sees nothing odd about threading a scene

⁶⁹ Lahr, “Comedies of Bad Manners,” 44.

⁷⁰ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 47.

⁷¹ Hirst, *Comedy of Manners*, 2.

⁷² “Comedies of Bad Manners,” 54.

⁷³ *Hay Fever*, 57.

from a play into her present reality, as her reality already is a play. It is in this manner that Coward most overtly blurs the “boundaries”⁷⁴ between theatre and the reality it is supposed to represent. Though *Hay Fever* is, in essence, a naturalistic play, its subject matter is anything but natural.

It is through such an ideology that the play makes its firmest ties to Butler, as the characters in the play directly comment on the gendered roles they are assigned to play. Sinfield comments how the Blisses are:

[...] artistic, unconventional, and impolite; their game is to take every slightest (heterosexual) amorousness as indicating a passionate wish to marry, elope, or conduct a major affair. They mock conventional love and confuse the distinction between sincerity and manners in emotion. The men are unmanly; Judith says her artistic son, Simon, is broad-hipped and uninterested in boxing.⁷⁵

The Blisses know the surface quality of their interactions; mocking the conventionality of marriage and gender norms. Sandy is left dumbstruck when his small indiscretion in the library turns into a proclamation of love from Sorel, and a dramatic, overblown argument between Sorel and Judith. Coward includes a stage direction at this moment indicating that Judith is “*starting to act*,” and gives another direction for Sorel to “*pla[y] up*” to her mother’s level of performance. Sorel begs her mother to “say you [Judith] understand and forgive!” to which Judith replies, “Understand! You forget, dear, I am a woman.”⁷⁶

“Woman” is thus Judith’s constant character— a role that precludes her from behaving in a certain manner, and is an obstacle to her forgiveness and understanding. She identifies herself with “*I am*” woman— a statement Sorel validates with “I know you are, mother”— which differs from Judith’s tendency to “be” things. Judith simultaneously identifies her

⁷⁴ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 57.

⁷⁵ Sinfield, “Private Lives/Public Theater,” 47.

⁷⁶ *Hay Fever*, 46.

womanliness as something with specific rules and boundaries, and also describes it as something intrinsically a part of herself and her identity. She does not have to “be” a woman, and yet feels somewhat limited in her abilities and actions since it is something she simply is. Coward does not hide the fact that even actresses with the most progressive understandings of superficial gendering still feel limited as women in the twenties. While Judith is able to shed or put on multiple characters throughout the play, the one role she cannot deny is the womanhood she is constantly reminded of.

This perhaps explains Judith’s earlier qualm, “You know, Sorel, you grow more damnably feminine every day. I wish I’d brought you up differently.”⁷⁷ At this moment in the play, Sorel is expressing her disapproval at Judith’s decision to invite Sandy; a conservatism Judith identifies as a “damnably feminine” characteristic. Judith finds nothing wrong with inviting a young, male houseguest to the home she shares with her husband, and feels no need to maintain feminine morality when she is not purposely playing the part of country hostess. She wishes she had brought Sorel up to behave differently, and not as a feminine, conservative girl. What becomes clear throughout the play, however, is that Sorel is as much of a chameleon as her mother, and that her “feminine” qualities are just a single aspect of her diverse and varied personality. Judith also recognizes, as *Sinfield* points out, a certain unmanly nature about Simon. She comments on his behavior and appearance in comparison to Sandy— a masculine, young boxer— saying how Simon is “so dreadfully un— that sort of thing.”⁷⁸ Judith, while somewhat resentful of the limitations on her femininity, is critical of Simon’s lack of masculinity. However, the fact that Simon lacks a certain masculine bravado is also largely due to the way *he* was raised. Just as Judith wishes Sorel was raised not to

⁷⁷ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 10.

⁷⁸ *Hay Fever*, 19.

behave femininely and conventionally, Judith has actually succeeded in raising Simon to reject masculine norms. Though a self-identified male, Simon looks very different from the other male characters and occupies himself with far less mundane, physical activities as Sandy and Richard do. He is aware that “masculine” behavior is nothing more than an act that he can, but does not have to, follow.

As the family is united through their enactment of *Love’s Whirlwind* at the end of Act Two, the guests can do nothing but silently “*look on, dazed and aghast*”⁷⁹ as the Blisses shriek and faint around them. The guests thus take on the role of the spectator, as Coward gives the audience member viewing *Hay Fever* a certain representation on the stage through the viewpoints of the conservative guests. What so bewilders the guests is not the family’s acting abilities, considering that Judith’s acting abilities are seen as attractive, but the Blisses’ capacity to slip so seamlessly between reality and play. As Sorel explains to Sandy, “we none of us ever mean anything;” a fact that significantly disturbs Myra. She calls the family an “infuriating set of hypocrites,” criticizing their egotism and falsity:

I’ve been working up for this, only every time I opened my mouth I’ve been mowed down by theatrical effects. You haven’t got one sincere or genuine feeling among the lot of you— you’re artificial to the point of lunacy. It’s a great pity you ever left the stage, Judith— it’s your rightful home.⁸⁰

What Myra does not understand, though, is that the Blisses’ artificiality and performance is, in fact, their reality. Very much aware of the performative nature of manners and gender, the one thing the Blisses cannot feign is ignorance. Therefore, Myra is correct in her belief that Judith’s “rightful home” is on the stage, but simply does not realize that Judith’s “stage” is everywhere since performance is not limited to a proscenium theatre.

⁷⁹ Coward, *Hay Fever*, 58.

⁸⁰ *Hay Fever*, 56.

Conclusion: A Fatal Sense of the Theatre

John Lahr explains how Coward “put on stage an actor’s understanding of the theatricality of self-expression;”⁸¹ using actor characters as tools for this realization. With Judith and her troupe of family players, Coward provides a clear instrument of deconstruction of mannered British society for the audience. Since Judith is an actress, the audience can watch how the roles she adopts span from characters in *Love’s Whirlwind* to mannered stereotypes of daily life— emphasizing the lack of differentiation in how all of these roles are performed. It is through this acknowledgement of mannered performativity that Coward finds the true reality of British society. He formulated such thoughts about role-playing years before Butler coined “performativity” as a conception of gender, as Butler’s thoughts are palpable and present even though Coward’s work premiered years before discussions of performative gender were being had.

Judith is an actress on and off the stage. Coward does play into actress stereotypes of sexual promiscuity and a disdain for conventionality, but mainly to celebrate them. *Hay Fever* is Coward’s ode to the mother-actress— the matriarch whose “sense of the theatre is always fatal.”⁸² Coward is as serious about the stage as Judith, as both view it as a home and framework for examining human tendencies. Coward’s comedy of manners thus

[...] deals with the rational organization of man’s most basic drives, while it is precisely the contrast between the coolness of technique and the passionate or sordid nature of these human motives which gives the plays their sharply ironic perspective.⁸³

The British actor, and particularly actress, found a complexity and attention to modernity in Coward’s plays that was not previously available. While not particularly the most radical

⁸¹ Lahr, “Comedies of Bad Manners,” 43.

⁸² Coward, *Hay Fever*, 47.

⁸³ Hirst, *Comedy of Manners*, 112.

exposé on women in the theatre, *Hay Fever* is an influential work not only in the British comedic cannon, but also as a step forward into explorations of gender, reality, and the performative actress.

Chapter Two: *The Writer* and Defying Delineation

In the age of “#MeToo” and “Time’s Up,” discussions of gender discrimination and abuse in the theatre are no longer obscured or ignored, but placed center stage in feminist theatrical discourse. Women’s role in the theatre is celebrated and encouraged, as women now directly challenge men and the oppressive force of the patriarchy as the obstacles preventing their success. These efforts began in Coward’s time with suffrage and the formation of women’s groups such as the AFL (Actresses’ Franchise League) in 1908.⁸⁴ However, the effort lessened during the 1940s and 1950s, as male playwrights dominated and national focus turned towards the war effort. Surges in mid-twentieth century English, as well as American, radical and feminist theatre are thus rooted in the 1960s, particularly after the 1968 abolishment of censorship by the English state.⁸⁵ This development resulted in significant changes for “the relationship between feminism, theatre, and women playwrights” with the “rise” of “‘alternative’, fringe’, or ‘political’ theatre” and the “development of a vigorous feminist movement.”⁸⁶ It is within this movement that the Women’s Theatre Group⁸⁷ was first established after the Women’s Festival for theatre in 1973. It is also when playwrights like Caryl Churchill, one of Ella Hickson’s main inspirations, came onto the British theatrical scene. These female playwrights believed it was time for “a new critical approach to the understanding of the function of gender in the theatrical imagination.”⁸⁸ As a result, they often incorporated second-wave feminist theories and analyses of gender in their

⁸⁴ Aston, Elaine, and Janelle Reinelt, “A Century in View: From Suffrage to the 1990s,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 4.

⁸⁵ Michelene Wandor, “The Impact of Feminism on the Theatre,” *Feminist Review*, no. 18 (1984): 76.

⁸⁶ Michelene Wandor, “Women Playwrights and the Challenge of Feminism in the 1970s,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, edited by Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 53.

⁸⁷ “the longest-running fulltime, professional all-women theatre company in the country:” Wandor, “The Impact of Feminism on the Theatre,” 78.

⁸⁸ Wandor, “Women Playwrights,” 53.

works, as these female playwrights were not “just buy[ing] culture” and the male-defined structure of the industry, but using their works to “pull apart the threads of meaning [they] produc[e].”⁸⁹

Moving to the 1980s and 1990s, another significant development for feminist and queer theatre was Butler’s theory of performativity introduced in her *Theatre Journal* essay (1988) and *Gender Trouble* (1990). As explained in Jill Dolan’s *Theatre and Sexuality*, Butler’s theories allowed theatre and performance studies scholars to understand “how the theatre apparatus inculcates gender and sexuality norms,” and how theatre often “creates what we consider reality by enforcing conventional notions of ‘normal.’”⁹⁰ Feminist playwrights of the eighties and nineties wanted theatre to challenge, rather than reinforce stereotype. Realism as a genre thus

[...] came under particular scrutiny because of its tendency to represent a hermetic world, closed off by the ‘fourth wall’ that imaginatively separates actors/characters from spectators, who are encouraged to identify and support worlds framed by conservative ideology.⁹¹

Contemporary playwrights still struggle to reestablish a connection between spectator and actor that realism and the fourth wall so segregated. Ella Hickson attempts to expose the segregation between spectator and actor as well as these cultural “norms” numerous times throughout *The Writer*; blurring all lines between audience, stage, and actor.

Ella Hickson came onto the scene in 2008 with her first play, *Eight*, which premiered at Edinburgh’s Fringe Festival. She followed up this success with *Precious Little Talent* in 2011, *Boys* in 2012, *Wendy and Peter Pan* in 2013, and *Merlin* in 2014. Her 2016 play *Oil*

⁸⁹ Jill Dolan, “Introduction,” in *The Feminist Spectator in Action: Feminist Criticism for the Stage and Screen* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 3.

⁹⁰ Jill Dolan, “Gay and Lesbian Lives and Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” in *Theatre & Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 15.

⁹¹ Dolan, “Gay and Lesbian Lives,” 15.

firmly established Hickson as a contemporary, politicized theatrical voice to be reckoned with, and her political activism was additionally established with her 2018 work, *The Writer*.⁹² Hickson has played with form and style since the beginning of her career with *Eight*, a play composed of eight monologues assessing the state-of-the-nation.⁹³ Hickson cites Tennessee Williams and Lorca for teaching her “lyricism and heat” in playwrighting, also praising authors like Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, and Alice Birch who had “breaking form in their bones.”⁹⁴ She especially thanks Caryl Churchill for teaching her “almost everything [she knows] about form as politics.”⁹⁵ This “form as politics” is the nucleus of *The Writer*. Hickson explains how she wanted *The Writer* to reveal that “naturalism is itself a political choice”⁹⁶ of conformity, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, considering it has been the dominating and expected structure of British theatre for many years. Hickson wants a fully female form for the theatre— a desire that puts her in direct discussion with feminists like Hélène Cixous as they both believe in the need for an “*écriture féminine*,”⁹⁷ a female language of identity and un-patriarchal self-expression. Hickson wants her structure to quite literally tear down the fourth wall these male dramatists have constructed, so that both she as playwright and her actors can communicate with the audience “on more than one level.”⁹⁸

⁹² "Ella Hickson," Drama Online, 2018, <https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/playwrights/ella-hickson-iid-134885>.

⁹³ Alice Jones, "Ella Hickson: A Playwright Who Grabs the Zeitgeist," *The Independent*, April 6, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/ella-hickson-a-playwright-who-grabs-the-zeitgeist-2263433.html>.

⁹⁴ "Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre in Conversation: The Writer," interview by Stephanie Bain, Youtube, June 26, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJZi5xCfspQ>.

⁹⁵ Jessie Thompson, "Ella Hickson on Writing, Confidence and Being Part of the Conversation," *Evening Standard*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/ella-hickson-i-always-want-to-be-in-the-conversation-with-whats-being-made-now-in-theatre3816371.html>.

⁹⁶ "Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre in Conversation: The Writer."

⁹⁷ See Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93.

⁹⁸ "Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre."

The Writer focuses on four, unnamed characters with “Writer,” played by Romola Garai in the original production, being the only stable identity to continue from the first to the last scene. The play is divided into five parts that each delve into particular questions of gendered theatrical performance on and off the stage. The play begins with a scene from Writer’s new play; a scene in which a Young Woman and Older Man argue over the purpose and nature of contemporary theatre and gender politics. There is then a staged Q & A session in which Writer, Director, Female Actor (previously playing Young Woman) and Male Actor (previously playing Older Man) discuss the scene and take questions from audience members. Scene Two of Hickson’s work shows Writer and Boyfriend (played by the same actor who played Older Man/Male Actor in Scene One) discussing Writer’s career options now that she has been offered a movie deal for a new screenplay. Writer spends the entire scene arguing what her concept of art should and could be, all the while being incredibly conscious that she is only a character on stage performing for an audience. Boyfriend is essentially oblivious, and constantly asserts his conventional opinions and desire for financial support. At the end of the Scene, the set holding the couple together literally falls to pieces, leaving Writer alone on stage.

Scene Three is the most distinct, as it consists entirely of monologue and chronicles Writer’s journey to find an all-female “tribe” where she finally feels whole and accepted. Scene Four disrupts the “atmospheric” Scene Three as Director returns and tells Writer that the new section of her play— as represented in the radical form that is Scene Three— is too radical to produce. Scene Five is then a parallel of Scene Two, but now Writer has a Girlfriend (played by the same actor who played Young Woman/Female Actor in Scene One) and lives a chic lifestyle compared to her life with Boyfriend in Scene Two. It is clear Writer

has chosen financial success over her sense of artistic integrity, as she can never seem to escape the overseeing eye of Director who not only directs the plays she writes, but every moment of her life. *The Writer* thus does not just feature an actress character, but is about the actress character that every woman embodies on a daily basis.

Scene One: Layers of Play

There is no official beginning to *The Writer*, as the first character and first scene suddenly materialize out of the audience. The Almeida, where the work premiered, is a small theatre with a curved wall behind the stage, and stage only slightly raised from the orchestra/stall seats. The website explains how it gives one the feeling of being “extremely close to the stage”⁹⁹ and involved in the performance: a statement I can corroborate. While theatre-goers take their seats in front of “*a bare stage, post-show*” with “*worker lights,*” a Young Woman— purposely dressed to resemble an audience member— grabs a bookbag from the aisle and hops on stage. Already the line between audience and stage is tested as the supposed boundary dividing the performance from the viewers is easily traversed. Hickson indicates in her stage directions how the space should be “*hers [Young Woman’s], for a moment*” before Older Man enters “*like he owns the space.*”¹⁰⁰ When the dialogue begins, Hickson does not specify who is speaking but lets the words themselves indicate character:

Hi.
Hi.
Do I—
I left my bag, I had to come back for it.¹⁰¹

While such an absence of strict character delineation does not come through in the actual performance since each character does possess a particular set of lines, Hickson’s lack of

⁹⁹ “The Building,” Almeida Theatre, Accessed December 11, 2018, <https://almeida.co.uk/the-building>.

¹⁰⁰ Ella Hickson, *The Writer*, (London: NHB, 2018), 11.

¹⁰¹ *The Writer*, 11.

character specificity on the page complements her ambiguity of space. Young Woman crosses the line between stage and audience numerous times during her opening conversation with Older Man; eliminating any clear divide between actor and spectator. Hickson does not name the characters, nor does she specify lines in the opening scene enhancing this sense of intentional vagueness and endless possibility.

It is also intriguing how quickly one realizes what lines are for Young Woman and Older Man without any mention of gender pronouns or context. Hickson thus tests our assumptions and the characterizations we automatically give to male or female characters. She does not allow the audience to rest or settle into the “natural,” but constantly engages with and dismantles what we, as audience members, have come to identify or expect as normal. In an interview with Stephanie Blaine, Blanche McIntyre (the director of the first production) explains how “the actors here are playing three or four things, three or four levels of awareness [...] trying to communicate on more than one level.”¹⁰² Hickson’s characters are no longer just actors or just mothers, or just actor-mothers, but are men, women, actors, girlfriends, writers, directors, symbols, etc. They can exist in the audience or on stage, and are specifically defined by their multiplicities: something Hickson explores extensively throughout the rest of the work. No one is exempt from performance—including the audience—as performance pours off the stage and the entire theatre becomes the playing space.

Hickson emphasizes this in Young Woman’s multiple monologues, as Young Woman questions the purpose of the theatre when life itself is already about playing pretend. Young Woman mocks conventional naturalism and plays that begin with “two people walking on

¹⁰² “Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre in Conversation: The Writer.”

stage pretending to be two other people and saying— ‘Hi’, ‘hi’’:¹⁰³ an ironic and self-reflexive statement considering these are the opening lines of *The Writer’s* opening scene. Young Woman cannot wrap her head around the idea that the audience can watch actors randomly moving furniture covered in “little bits of flesh-colored tape sticking the mics on” and accept it as truth; as “motherfucking real life.”¹⁰⁴ For her, real life is “Trump” and “joblessness” and endless “monstrosities”— none of which are depicted in contemporary theatre. Instead, as Young Woman goes on to explain, contemporary theatre is only concerned with making money and pleasing the paying public.

Hickson introduces the demands of commercialism into discussions of gender and theatre, as truth and real become even more elusive in a capitalistic society that will believe anything for money. Young Woman critiques the actors themselves and the loss of the “mythic” pulse that used to run through theatre and the city:

And the actors man, they’ve got nothing new, no insides, they just need the job—they know it’s pretend so they’re living on the applause and applause alone and that is fucking dangerous [...] You’re staring at them thinking ‘do what you like’, go on, stop saying those lines and doing what he’s told you to do, do something you actually like, go on. [...] because then at least someone is actually doing it for real.¹⁰⁵

While Judith in *Hay Fever* and the real actresses of her time were some of the most knowledgeable and understanding people of their society, the actors and actresses in the time of *The Writer* are empty and artificial. These actors do not find a higher revelation about life and its artifice through their professions, but instead find themselves feeding off of applause for their performance. Young Woman explains how these actors have “been saying lines so long you’ve got no sense of it [what is real]” and how they have now become “deaf to the

¹⁰³ Hickson, *The Writer*, 13.

¹⁰⁴ *The Writer*, 13.

¹⁰⁵ *The Writer*, 14.

sound of their own wanting”¹⁰⁶— yet these are the people the audience watches and idolizes. For so many audience members, theatre is merely another method of escapism from the requirements of “real” life, so it is only natural that they would praise these actors who so easily assume the frivolous roles male playwrights have written for them. It is easier to be someone else or to assume an expected gender/class role than to grapple with one’s true, inner desires. Hickson does not commend performance and performativity as a game to be won or as only a part of an actor’s/actress’s identity, but presents it as an insidiously inherent part of life that numbs the pain of reality— as an exemption from personal responsibility and choice.

The majority of Scene One consists of a heated conversation between Young Woman and Older Man over the state of art in a commercial and patriarchal society. The conversation is direct and oftentimes on the nose when it comes to male versus female concerns about the theatre. Young Woman complains how theatre has become nothing more than “women in completely unnecessary hot pants” or “tight skirts” who “lea[n] arse-first over a desk for twenty minutes, for no fucking reason.”¹⁰⁷ The irony is significant in these self-reflexive moments, as the actress playing Young Woman is commenting on her own profession and what it has been reduced to for the sake of getting male patrons to attend the theatre. Judith similarly comments on what it is like to act in her respective time period, as she laments about her disappearing beauty and the fact that she has been forced to retire from the stage. Judith and the Victorian actresses before her were also often vilified for their rejection of social norms, as acting was seen as a form of rebellion in the beginning of the twentieth century. Judith is not a common mother or a “natural” mother, and it is her actress mentality

¹⁰⁶ Hickson, *The Writer*, 14.

¹⁰⁷ *The Writer*, 13-4.

that is blamed for her inability to survive in a “natural,” domestic atmosphere. While Judith does remark on the forcefulness with which she has had to subscribe to domestic life, she does not specifically comment on the fact that theatre itself upholds this sexualization and demonization women experience as actresses in their daily life. For *Young Woman*, on the other hand, the theatre is her main target of attack for the way it vilifies actresses in their own habitat. Becoming an actress in the first place is no longer seen as a sinful or corrupt decision for a woman. Therefore, *Young Woman* no longer needs to argue for acceptance of women on the stage like the Victorian actresses did, but now must argue for accuracy of *depiction* of women on the stage. Women are not just props meant to adorn a set, but are living, individualized human beings. *Young Woman* takes a step that Judith never did, arguing not only for the rights of the actress characters in the fictive world of *The Writer*, but also for the rights of the real-life actress playing the part of *Young Woman* in the production.

According to *Young Woman*, when an actress walks on the stage, the audience’s first thought is, “How old is she? How hot is she? How fuckable is she?” whereas an actor walking on stage elicits the response, “What’s he got to say? What’s he going to *do*?”¹⁰⁸ In direct conversation with Butler, *Young Woman* explains how actresses and women are “made to present, like some animal”¹⁰⁹ on display. Actresses have it the worst, as they are forced to present to hundreds of people every night in plays where they wear hot pants and pour water on a white shirt so the whole audience is “staring at [their] tits.”¹¹⁰ They are not valued for their dialogue but for the visual enhancement they add to a scene, as moments on stage that are meant to be sexually empowering are still nothing more than humiliating for

¹⁰⁸ Hickson, *The Writer*, 22-3.

¹⁰⁹ *The Writer*, 14-5.

¹¹⁰ *The Writer*, 22.

the actress being forced to wear tight skirts and see-through tops. Even Young Woman, fully dressed and having an intellectual argument with Older Man, is at one point corrected by Older Man on her argumentative skills: “Being oppositional to everything [...] undermines your argument. Take the note.”¹¹¹ Hickson’s use of “take the note” again places the scene in a self-reflexive context. Older Man is correcting Young Woman as if she is one of the actresses he is directing, telling her to “take his note” on how to make her argument stronger. The connection between performance and reality is again blurred, as Young Woman is being told how to act in a “real” argument in the way Older Man believes she should “act.” The only reason he remains invested in this conversation is because he finds Young Woman’s anger “zeitgeisty” and believes it would “get bums on seats;”¹¹² essentializing her actual feelings and words and hearing them as dialogue that could make for interesting theatre.

He makes a similar comment when Young Woman reveals that she has met Older Man before. Young Woman explains how, when she was only eighteen, she met Older Man on a panel to discuss modern theatre. After the panel was over, he praised Young Woman’s work and offered her a job, before promptly taking her to a pub and trying to kiss her. Young Woman then blames Older Man for shattering her desire to write for theatre, a remark he replies to with, “Move yourself out of the child position—stop playing the victim—that I’m not even sure you were.”¹¹³ Older Man throws yet another role at Young Woman, stating how she is “playing the victim” with no regard for the fact that she was eighteen and he was over thirty when this interaction occurred. He is bewildered that she did not accept his job offer in spite of his sexual advances, and leaves Young Woman silent when he finally says

¹¹¹ Hickson, *The Writer*, 24.

¹¹² *The Writer*, 21.

¹¹³ *The Writer*, 29.

how she must “take responsibility for [her] own insecurity. You shouldn’t need my approval.”¹¹⁴

It is at this point that the characters suddenly grab chairs and are joined onstage by Writer and Director. They all sit in a line facing the audience; at which point it becomes clear that the previous interaction between Young Woman and Older Man was from a play Writer has written, and that this is the Q & A session to discuss the work. In her transitioning stage direction, Hickson explains how Writer and Director “*should be older and slightly less attractive versions of their stage selves,*” and how “*the actor that previously played the WRITER becomes FEMALE ACTOR, the actor that previously played the DIRECTOR becomes MALE ACTOR.*”¹¹⁵ Here, Hickson begins adding additional layers to performance and conceptions of reality. Building off of the beginning where the line between audience and performer is hazily constructed, audience interaction is now encouraged if not required. As a part of the audience witnessing this staged Q & A, I was not totally aware if the audience members asking questions were planted or actual patrons of the theatre. While Hickson’s script does specify that audience plants are used to ask very specific, scripted questions, it was still difficult to distinguish as an audience member what questions were purposely part of the performance. Hickson’s note that Director and Writer are “less attractive versions of their stage selves” presents an interesting comparison and question of reality and performance. Writer and Director are still characters in Hickson’s work and, therefore, are actors playing roles just as Female Actress and Male Actor played Young Woman and Older Man in the previous scene. However, Hickson specifies that the actors playing Young Woman/Female Actress and Older Man/Male Actor should be more attractive

¹¹⁴ Hickson, *The Writer*, 30.

¹¹⁵ *The Writer*, 30.

than Writer and Director. Again, performance is clearly not representative of reality. The seamless transition of Young Woman and Older Man into Female Actress and Male Actor also emphasized the ease with which individuals transition from daily life to performance. Their transformation is not pointed out or acknowledged, but is an obvious and accepted part of their occupation as actors.

The Q & A begins with an awkward silence, causing Writer to ask Director, “Uh—yeah, shall I?” to which he answers, “Yep, yeah,” before she bothers to speak.¹¹⁶ Writer’s dialogue throughout this section is hesitant and stumbling—almost none of her sentences are completed, and a majority of what she says is either “uh” or “um.” She constantly “looks to Director” after every comment for his approval, and while Director repeatedly interrupts Writer unapologetically, Writer immediately states, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt” when she interjects into one of Male Actor’s comments.¹¹⁷ The power divide is clear and highly evidenced in the text itself. Although it is Writer’s play, she is hesitant to embrace her power as the creator of this work. She still finds it necessary to assume an inferior position to the Director and to cover her influential position of playwright with self-doubt and gestures of insecurity.

Where the Writer does gain a level of confidence is when she discusses the structure of the work. Director comments on an earlier draft of Writer’s work that was, in his opinion, an endless, unstructured rant. He states how it is not enough to just “scream and shout” at the audience since it “becomes insufferable”¹¹⁸ and does not make for good theatre. Writer counters this, explaining how Young Woman is “just trying to get heard” and how the

¹¹⁶ Hickson, *The Writer*, 30-1.

¹¹⁷ *The Writer*, 35.

¹¹⁸ *The Writer*, 31-2.

structure for this scene should be “formed through instinct.” While Director may see it as a mess, Writer reminds him that it is only a mess “according to [his] idea of structure.”¹¹⁹

Although Coward utilized the comedy of manners form as a somewhat subversive critique of Victorian theatre and English society, Hickson is forthright about the ways in which she wants to play with patriarchal master narratives and classic theatrical structures. Hickson infuses her beliefs into the Writer who directly challenges the difference in perspectives between the male Director and female Writer and Actress. Writer laments how women playwrights seem to get “stuck between this— you know, moany-victim place or angry-woman place— and it doesn’t feel like you can get heard anywhere in between.” In adapting her work to Director’s specifications, she feels that the structure of “argument [...] formally— is pretty, it’s his side of things. They’re the terms he wants to be on.”¹²⁰

This is why Writer’s work and, overall, Hickson’s work defy typical boundaries and specifications of “good” theatre. Clear and understandable argument, while commonly identified as an indication of successful or powerful dialogue, is also a facet of a patriarchally-dominated theatrical cannon. “The entire structure of the Western world is organized on the principle of how ‘he thinks,’” and while Writer’s initial draft may have seemed like a self-indulgent rant to the Director, Female Actress assures Writer that “It doesn’t feel like a rant— to play it;” it does not feel like a rant to speak something that is just “a woman standing on stage saying how she feels.”¹²¹ Regardless, Scene One ends the way the scene in the Writer’s play ends; with Writer saying how Young Woman “needs [Older

¹¹⁹ Hickson, *The Writer*, 32.

¹²⁰ *The Writer*, 31.

¹²¹ *The Writer*, 33.

Man's] permission" to put on her work. There is a silence from all of the characters, and Director exits asking Writer to send more pages when she has them.

Scene Two: Performative Reality and Naturalized Performance

Each section of Hickson's work possesses a distinct quality and objective, and it is in Scene Two that the theatrical and gendered boundaries of performance and naturalism are significantly tested. While the first section already begins to deconstruct the relation between reality, performance, and role-playing, the second section attempts to disassemble anything that may seem absolute or expected when watching a play. Revolving around the concept and imagery of layers, this section specifically ventures to peel away the layers of artifice that the characters often mistake as reality. Scene Two opens with an "all female" stage management team rearranging and reconstructing the Q & A set into an "urban couple's front room."¹²² There is no blackout for the set change into Scene Two, and Hickson clearly wishes for the audience to watch the stage managers build the scene. While the opening of Scene One and the transition into the staged question and answer session are seamless and unannounced, the transition to Scene Two is messy with a very constructed, artificial quality. The management team is specifically meant to construct the urban apartment set around the character, Boyfriend, who is played by the same actor that played Male Actor in the first section.

The stage management team must also construct the set "like mothers" around the Boyfriend; a stage direction that, while not particularly specific in action, explores the often-overlooked gendered implications present both in the theatre and in general social life. As the man/male actor sits, the female crew members quite literally build his life around him. His walls and furniture are slid into place as a "chair moves beneath him" for him to sit on, and

¹²² Hickson, *The Writer*, 37.

the entire process occurs without his slightest acknowledgement. Although in theatre it is common if not ubiquitous to ignore a set crew as sets are constructed or broken down, adding the gendered implications of women with “mother”-like qualities grounds the situation in a place of reality. Suddenly, the crew members take on roles of management and mother—both positions of utmost importance and significance but that are often ignored or forgotten. They exist in the background doing the literal and figurative heavy lifting, and then quickly exit so Boyfriend can continue the scene.

The Writer then enters, though she is promptly asked to exit and re-enter so Boyfriend can carry out his surprise for her. Just as Judith became a “Mother-Actress” within the domestic atmosphere of her home, Writer now becomes a “Girlfriend-Writer” once she enters her naturalistic-looking apartment. Like Coward, Hickson is also interested in the behavior of the theatrical woman in so-called “real” life, and uses Scene Two to explore the different performances expected when Writer is in the theatre versus when she is at “home.” When Writer is finally allowed to enter the three-wall construction representative of her apartment, Boyfriend throws confetti and pops a party popper in celebration of Writer’s new movie contract—a celebration that is quickly shot down with the Writer’s refusal to accept the offer presented in the contract. What begins as a somewhat “naturalistic” argument regarding career aspirations and future plans soon deteriorates; eventually morphing into a larger questioning of how to exist when it is not clear what is stage and what is not. The audience is no longer asked to suspend its disbelief, and is instead encouraged to question why one is asked to suspend disbelief in the first place.

Hickson’s attention to clothing and costume that begins in Scene One is carried throughout Scene Two. Female Actress questions the choice of “hot pants” for female

actresses in the opening scene, and both Writer and Boyfriend explore the connections between costume, sexuality, and role throughout their argument in Scene Two. Boyfriend demands that Writer keep her coat on during sex because it makes her “look like a grown up” and he “feel[s] like [he’s] fucking a grown-up.”¹²³ Writer’s coat makes her a grown-up, or at least makes her appear as a grown-up, which is clearly something Boyfriend finds arousing. Writer is only able to take her coat off after their sex has ended and Boyfriend has given her permission to do so. She is even reluctant to remove it, but nonetheless does so when Boyfriend decides that “It’s weird to wear a coat inside” and demands that she “take it off.”¹²⁴ Boyfriend then uses the fact that he is wearing an apron as an argumentative point. Due to the fact that he has “got a fucking apron on,”¹²⁵ Writer should naturally be more appreciative and receptive of his desire for her to take the film job. He has assumed an unnatural, feminine role for himself as represented in his apron— an article of clothing typically worn by a female housewife. He does not even complain about cooking, but specifically references his wearing of the apron as symbolically significant and something that should be appreciated. He has literally “costumed” himself in the role that Writer should, according to culturally defined norms, be playing. Instead, she is the one in the “grown-up” coat with the job, and he is the one forced to “play” housewife. Her power, symbolized in the coat, is only attractive to Boyfriend when he assumes he will be profiting from her business deal. As soon as he realizes he is not able to control the situation and convince Writer to accept the deal, he is suddenly very self-conscious about the clothes they are both wearing. Comparable to Judith who shows the importance of costume to character with her galoshes

¹²³ Hickson, *The Writer*, 39.

¹²⁴ *The Writer*, 40.

¹²⁵ *The Writer*, 43.

and gloves, Boyfriend highlights the important connection between clothing as a signifier of power and clothing as literal power. Just as the set crew's power is diminished when they are given the gendered note to construct the set around Boyfriend "like mothers," Boyfriend similarly recognizes a sense of inferiority when he wears the apron, a typically female-gendered article of clothing.

Hickson's focus on clothing is most significant in the final moments of Scene Two, as Boyfriend "transforms entirely—takes off clothes, a wig"—back into Male Actor. Out of his Boyfriend costume, Male Actor "has a conversation with [a] costume" woman now that the "real person—the real boyfriend has gone."¹²⁶ Hickson's use of "real" here is interesting, as so much of Scene Two is spent dissolving the line between real and imagined. Nonetheless, the simple action of stripping costume additionally comments on the ease in which roles are assumed, enforced, or discarded. When disrobed, Boyfriend is also not just a person or ordinary human, but is still Male Actor. Even out of costume these individuals are still Actors, as role-playing—though largely connected to costume and visual symbols of sexualized or domesticized femininity—does not end once the costume is taken off.

Writer directly addresses such an idea: pointedly asking Boyfriend, "Don't you ever feel like all this is pretending?"¹²⁷ Hickson's Writer is simultaneously actress, playwright, and woman who, even though finally in charge of what is being written, still feels as if her life and her reality are nothing more than pretend. A step beyond Coward's Judith, Hickson's Writer recognizes how she constantly performs in her everyday life and does not blame an "actress" mentality for making her this way. Writer explains her daily struggle:

It's physically painful, a lot of the time, when we have friends over and I hold champagne and I go to bed after and pretend that I'm sleeping. And I do it every

¹²⁶ Hickson, *The Writer*, 56.

¹²⁷ *The Writer*, 46.

single day even though it makes my skin itch [...] Either I can feel real but I'm living in a world of cartoons or you and the world are real and I feel like I go see-through.¹²⁸

The fluidity of reality and performance explored in Scene Two is thus echoed in Writer's own sense of identity. She cannot compartmentalize or find a particular niche within her reality and given circumstances, but instead is left with a sense of purgatorial dissatisfaction. What is defined as naturalistic or normal like drinking champagne or sleeping is what, to Writer, is the most artificial and fake—the things one should find ordinary and inherent, Writer must act out and pretend. If she feels “see-through” or is unable to exist, it is consequently impossible for her to experience her immediate surroundings with any sense of tangibility. Boyfriend, on the other hand, insists, “No, I don't think this is pretending. I think it's real life. And I think you can't handle it.” He blames Writer's unhappiness on her need for “drama” and her “stages and [...] stories”¹²⁹ that obscure her view of the simple reality before her. After Writer recites a poem, claiming that this is what “feels real” to her, Boyfriend can do nothing but reiterate the fact that “It's not real” in his own sense of reality where “truth is not carte blanche,”¹³⁰ and where there are some truths people should keep to themselves.

Butler similarly explores the gendered aspects of performance and reality:

In the theatre, one can say, 'this is just an act,' and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real. Because of this distinction, one can maintain one's sense of reality [...] the various conventions which announce that 'this is only a play' allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life. On the street or in the bus, the act becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act [...] there is no presumption that the act is distinct from a reality.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Hickson, *The Writer*, 52.

¹²⁹ *The Writer*, 47.

¹³⁰ *The Writer*, 48-50.

¹³¹ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 527.

Boyfriend, who does not feel the need to perform himself “on the street or in a bus,” is easily able to make the distinction between the theatrical and the “real.” They are distinct entities, and he can unflinchingly decide what is a “play” and what is real life. Writer, on the other hand, not only is knowledgeable of the way characters with certain male and female behaviors are written, but also, as described above, feels that she spends much of her daily existence pretending. Her knowledge of the theatre does not feel separate from her knowledge of “real” life. She, therefore, cannot presume that her “act” of drinking champagne or pretending to sleep is any different from the actors who drink champagne or pretend to sleep on stage.

Hickson acknowledges Writer’s and Boyfriend’s concepts of life and pretend with her stage directions: “*BOYFRIEND is very much in the sitting room and not at all on stage,*” and, “[*BOYFRIEND*] *goes to the fake window and stares through the window at the blank, theatre wall for some time. He breathes like the view is giving him freedom.*”¹³² Boyfriend is a character that exists only in the constructed space of Scene Two. He begins to exist once the set is constructed around him, and, unlike Writer, does not venture outside of the apartment at all during the scene. He is “very much in the sitting room and not at all on stage.” He has no recognition of anything beyond the three fake walls around him, and can stare out of a fake window like “the view is giving him freedom.” Even though the audience can see the back, brick walls of the theatre as well as costume racks and the set crew, Boyfriend remains oblivious and entirely contained within the naturalistic theatrical space of the apartment.

¹³² Hickson, *The Writer*, 51.

His relationship to the space is greatly contrasted with Writer's understanding that she is very much "on stage." Halfway through the scene, Director from the Q & A in Scene One begins to stand in the wings. He is visible to the audience and begins to draw Writer's attention away from Boyfriend in the apartment. His unavoidable presence continually reminds Writer of the fact that life—specifically *her* life—is regulated and dictated by a certain male presence:

*DIRECTOR is watching her. Just watching. WRITER knows he is there, always there—but doesn't turn to look at him. WRITER steps out of costume. DIRECTOR watches.*¹³³

Writer's furtive glances at Director in Scene One are thus visualized even further in Scene Two, as Writer is no longer just asking Director for permission to speak or put on her play, but for permission to live at all. Hickson's Director is simultaneously a literal obstacle to Writer's work and symbolic embodiment of the male gaze. Even when he is not there, Writer feels his pressure and his presence. He is both the source of her imprisonment, and the source of her freedom to write and have a job in the theatre.

Throughout the scene, Writer is also repeatedly distracted by the sound of a baby crying. The noise particularly increases when Boyfriend gets on one knee for an attempted proposal, which Writer quickly shuts down first by telling him to get up because she "feels huge," and then saying, "If you don't get up, I'm worried. I won't want to fuck you any more."¹³⁴ As the scene continues and Boyfriend more aggressively asserts his opinions on life and how Writer must accept conventionality, the sound of the baby only gets louder. Writer mentions it, eliciting Boyfriend's response, "I think it's coming from next door." Writer, however, claims that "there is no next door" as the noise, for her, becomes

¹³³ Hickson, *The Writer*, 56.

¹³⁴ *The Writer*, 54.

“*insufferably loud*” while Boyfriend “*doesn’t seem to notice how loud it is.*”¹³⁵ The scene culminates in the Boyfriend taking a live baby from a member of stage management and bringing it onto the stage. Writer knowingly exclaims, “That’s not our baby” and “That child belongs to the woman in the wings. That child is being paid to be here,” even though Boyfriend now begins calling Writer “Mummy” and states assuredly that, “We have a baby.”¹³⁶ In one of the most self-referential moments of the play, Writer attempts to speak out of character but is forced back into a certain characterization by Boyfriend. She comments how the baby— a part of Hickson’s play— is quite literally being paid to come on stage at this particular moment.

It is unclear then what Writer becomes at this point in time, as she is neither an impartial observer of the play’s action, nor is she a totally immersed character that subscribes to Boyfriend’s claim that she is a “Mummy.” It is at this moment that “*the fabric breaks*” and the set starts dissolving and crashing around them. Writer’s quite literal “calling” to domestic motherhood from the screaming child is ignored, as she cannot accept the role of mother that Boyfriend expects her to willingly adopt. Writer, holding the child, does “*flin[ch] for a second—not wanting to let go, not wanting to see it disappear*” when stage management comes to take the child, but eventually relinquishes her grip as the life created for her on the stage is disassembled and “*put in boxes.*”¹³⁷ What seemed like reality now “*stops existing,*” as Writer is left in a sense of ambiguous confusion where pretend, performance, and truth are indefinable. In Writer’s world, role-playing is multi-leveled and an expected part of life.

Where *Hay Fever* distinctly points out the performativity of societal life and is

¹³⁵ Hickson, *The Writer*, 48.

¹³⁶ *The Writer*, 56.

¹³⁷ *The Writer*, 56.

straightforward with its examination of Judith's role of woman and mother, *The Writer* makes no clear distinctions but instead raises additional questions regarding the ingrained nature of expected gender roles.

Scene Three: "The Provocation"

Scene three is perhaps the most distinctive and notable moment of *The Writer*. In the performance I saw, Scene Two and its remaining naturalistic qualities essentially exploded in the transition to Scene Three: everything went black, the stage was covered in strange lighting, and odd, indistinguishable sounds filled the theatre. Hickson prefaces this section, titled "The Provocation," with the note:

What follows should be an attempt at staging female experience, the director should be aware of avoiding the inherently patriarchal nature of theatre: Female characters should do— they are not having things done to them. Bodies are for action, not titillation or decoration. There should be no looking. The protagonist should own the space.¹³⁸

The direction is not specific, and is not really a direction at all— yet Hickson feels that it is necessary to include it. She does not define "female experience," nor does she include examples or thoughts about the "inherently patriarchal nature of theatre." Both are left to the director's discretion. Blanche McIntyre interpreted the notes as a literal powering down of the theatre. Visually, the stage seemed to malfunction with electrical shocks and explosions of jarring sounds. For McIntyre, it seems that female experience is found in absolute destruction of anything clear, specific, or immediately understandable. However, this was only one production's interpretation— there is no saying how other directors, possibly even male ones, might decide to stage "female experience." Hickson's somewhat ambiguous and textually-based note thus takes on the form of a personal preference rather than just an

¹³⁸ Hickson, *The Writer*, 57.

unclear stage direction; something she wishes to imbue into the performance but without giving a specific method of how to do so. What is clear, though, is that the opening scenes of *The Writer* are meant to serve as examples and warnings of theatre's patriarchal nature, both on and off stage. Writer is forced to deal in absolutes both with her work as seen in the Q & A section, and in her understanding of reality versus performance as seen in her argument with Boyfriend. The essence of naturalism and clear form that are still somewhat identifiable in Scene One begin to break down with the literal deconstruction of the set in Scene Two, and are completely demolished in Scene Three. In this manner, as Hickson's characters strip costume and question layers of reality, the play's structure follows suit. These first few scenes fall further and further from expected form and theatrical structure to the point where, in Hickson's mind, female experience can be accurately represented.

This new theatrical world is one in which female characters "*should do*." Hickson thus implies that most theatrical work generally features women either having "things done to them," or serving as mere decoration. Again, she does not specify exactly what "doing" should look like. She challenges the director with the task, including little recommendation on how to accomplish it. It is ironic that Hickson writes "there should be no looking" when an entire audience is uninterruptedly staring at the female characters. This stage direction presents a dilemma that Hickson herself does not fully address. If she wishes to demolish the thought of "looking" and "watching"— particularly in respect to the male gaze embodied in Director— theatre is a difficult place to accomplish such a task. Hickson most likely hopes to change the *way* in which "looking" occurs in women's daily life and on stage, and perhaps having a female character deliver a seven-page monologue without the onlooking presence of any male characters is the way to do so.

The actress playing Writer is left alone on stage at the start of Scene Three and dives into a seven-page monologue. She is joined partway through her speech by a silent female presence who is played by the actress who previously played Young Woman/Female Actress. However, the actress who was playing Writer is no longer just Writer, and the other female actress is no longer Young Woman/Female Actress. They are undescribed bodies on stage—“We are both mothers and both children [...] both daughters, both brothers, both friends, both lovers”¹³⁹— who, through monologue, identify *themselves* as women or female-identifying. The sequence begins with the actress (who was playing Writer) stating: “I stand, mostly unable to move—exhausted from all the pretending.”¹⁴⁰ It is in moments like this that the “actress” takes on its most contemporary framework. The actress reciting this monologue is not a character, yet she knows that she is pretending. Judith in *Hay Fever*, though astute in her mocking of societal norms and self-reflective ability to “act” herself, is still unable to recognize just how much of her identity is wrapped up in and defined by performance. In direct discourse with Butler, the woman standing on stage in Scene Three is exhausted from performing and pretending all of the time. While Butler’s theory rests on the assumption that individuals do not know that they are constantly performing gender, Hickson’s characters do possess some higher recognition of theatricality and the gendered roles they perform on a daily basis. The female narrator in this scene confronts the audience with this knowledge, almost reversing the looker/looked-at scenario Hickson describes in her opening stage direction. The narrator reciting the monologue is the only thing for the audience to look at, and she is fully aware of our gaze. Instead of shrinking underneath it, she uses it as fuel to tell her story of her female experience.

¹³⁹ Hickson, *The Writer*, 64.

¹⁴⁰ *The Writer*, 57.

The monologue continues with a personal anecdote of the time the female character went to get a contraceptive device that “feels like having the hood of a coat hanger pulled up through your esophagus”— the “alien pain of a foreign object.”¹⁴¹ Scene Three starts with this description of a specifically-female experience that the narrator divulges with total honesty. Suddenly, the monologue morphs into a story of Semele, one of Zeus’ lovers in Greek mythology, who went “out into the world to collect her daughters,” one of which is the narrator herself. In the midst of these anecdotes, personal stories, and discussions of female-centric myth, the narrator will somewhat randomly state the thoughts running through her mind— “false flatterers are the enemy. When you are cutting your teeth on power do not— I repeat, do not, entertain compliments. Get on with your work”— which gives the monologue a certain stream-of-consciousness effect. This scene is completely unique compared to the previous two where patriarchy was a controlling and limiting presence. Here, in a theatrical space separate from fake apartments and enforced pretending, the narrator is free to say whatever she likes; driving home the point the narrator, and Hickson, are trying to make with such a structure.

The narrator then recounts her experience travelling to a new world; “wading, pushing, splashing, crashing” through an unspecified lake to get there. She swims with a “little and Midwestern” woman, and when they arrive at the shore, both “emerge from the water [with] the damp sheen of prehistoric beast about [them].”¹⁴² As she walks along the forested island, the narrator’s “body changes. Longer limbs, broad-shouldered with an impressive gait. Six feet or more.” Hickson’s female world now begins to take shape. The women of this world are not sexualized. There is “no place for tits, or jugs, or ass” in a forest

¹⁴¹ Hickson, *The Writer*, 57.

¹⁴² *The Writer*, 60.

of bears. Bodies should be practical with “thicker skin on the soles of my feet so that I can stamp on snakeheads.” The narrator laughs at “having spent a lifetime negotiating with God for body alterations (an ungrateful waste of a prayer)”¹⁴³ when she realizes that her body is capable of much more than visual gratification. The narrator explains how, in this realm, “no one is sexy. Everything is sex. There is no looking. There is only being.”¹⁴⁴ Hickson validates the Young Woman’s hypothesis from Scene One; that dismantling capitalism and overturning the patriarchy does solve everything. In placing women in a natural and unpopulated environment, Hickson explores a sense of freedom away from culture, society, economic stratification and, most importantly, men. It is a return to the natural that liberates, as there is no longer the requirement to appear or act a certain way like Writer and Young Woman/Female Actress in the earlier two scenes.

Unlike Butler, Hickson reinforces and embraces the inherent “femaleness” of the female body. In reference to De Beauvoir, Butler writes:

[...] to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project.¹⁴⁵

Hickson does not fully deny this concept. The earlier scenes were clear representatives of ways women have learned to “do” and perform their genders. However, Hickson does seem to believe in an essential womanliness that is not acted, but ever-present. In Scene Three, the narrator and her mate “fuck” with “very little ceremony and even less fuss.” The narrator revels in “negotiat[ing] [her] sameness on another”¹⁴⁶ and celebrating it in a manner that

¹⁴³ Hickson, *The Writer*, 61.

¹⁴⁴ *The Writer*, 63.

¹⁴⁵ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 522.

¹⁴⁶ *The Writer*, 63.

directly links womanhood to biological anatomy and sex. Hickson also includes a note that describes the women's dance as "bodylessness/sameness." Hickson seems to view the female colony as transcendent of the body, as the female body is only directly commented on and objectified in patriarchal societies. Here, where all bodies are the same, Hickson suggests that there is no longer a need for "looking" nor referencing the body as anything other than a vessel of being. While Hickson may say these women have "transcended" their bodies, the narrator's monologue also repeatedly stresses their relatedness through their female anatomy. Hickson believes there is something internally "real" that her characters discover once they have left patriarchal and capitalistic society. In this new world the women have constructed, Hickson denies Butler's claim that "the body is only known through its gendered appearance."¹⁴⁷ Here, it is possible to be subversive as the narrator states how "for the first time in [her] life, even at this size, it feels okay to follow someone smaller than [her]."¹⁴⁸ The women's bodies, because they are all alike and no longer subjected to male scrutiny, lose their societal value to become simply sexed bodies: nothing is sexy, everything is sex.

Therefore, there is no reason for these women to continue "playing small" or "pretending straightness" in the presence of men, and instead they are free to tell their stories. This is a colony of actresses; of women who knew nothing but to bite back tears and continue playing a part society has designated for them. Their narratives are not methods of escapism from their gendered reality, but recognitions of how reality has forced them to pretend. This female world is not watched by Director but is overseen by Semele who "watches, smiling—laughing—ripping the heads off chickens, spitting fig pips, biting into dark tomatoes."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Butler, "Performative Acts," 523.

¹⁴⁸ Hickson, *The Writer*, 60.

¹⁴⁹ *The Writer*, 63.

These women have found acceptance with one another, and are able to drop performances of their gender to embrace their biological sex. Hickson's lack of differentiation of sex and gender does make this section somewhat unclear, as she does not explicitly discuss what gender has become or if it even still exists in a society where everyone is "the same" but all still identify as female. It is again difficult to see how closely Hickson's examination of gender performance aligns with Butler, as Hickson does make it clear that forced heteronormativity and feminine performance exist, but does not directly describe where it goes or if gender is preserved once men are out of the picture. While Butler asserts that there is no "original" or "real" behind gender performance— that it is all a "regulatory fiction"¹⁵⁰ created out of cultural norms— it is debatable what "real" Hickson is still holding onto, or if sexed anatomy is what Hickson views as indicative of innate, "real" gender.

This section is also distinct and crucial to the play as it deals with more radical forms of feminism in the theatre. Its focus on the "spirituality" of women and a return to the natural, exhibiting concepts like Helene Cixous' *écriture féminine*, and her theatrical model where plot is erased and "the stage is woman."¹⁵¹ It also, as a call back to the natural, seems somewhat representative of ritualistic Greek theatre. Writer longs for something "mythic," and this feminist utopia delivers with women telling stories and "sitting at the campfire."¹⁵² According to Hickson, this scene is a "reclamation" of an "origin story"¹⁵³ so that women have Semele like men have Zeus and Oedipus. The myth of Semele that pervades this section provides these ties to Greek and Roman theatre overseen by the gods, as Hickson privileges

¹⁵⁰ Butler, "Performative Acts," 528.

¹⁵¹ Dolan, "Introduction," 8.

¹⁵² "Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre in Conversation: The Writer."

¹⁵³ "Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre."

such theatre as “living” as opposed to the more naturalistic, money-making, male-dominated forms that have inundated contemporary theatre.

What this section does fails to address, though, is the inherently raced notions of “tribal.” Writer specifically refers to the women around her as a “tribe” who “*start to gently stamp—to move [...] They dance—tribal—Fire.*”¹⁵⁴ While Hickson’s comparison of the female group to a tribe is not illogical, it fails to incorporate or recognize the larger connotations “tribe” represents in larger, racial cultural contexts. It is ironic that Hickson incorporates this so freely into the play without much discussion or critique — even if she only does so to reference the form and language of radical feminist discourse. The section’s somewhat clumsy dealings with raced terminology are especially questionable since Writer, Hickson’s own character, is so caught off guard in Scene One when an audience member asks about race in Writer’s work during the Q & A. Writer is left flailing with a noncommittal, “I totally acknowledge that the play doesn’t really deal with it [...] I admit that—sorry.”¹⁵⁵ Male and Female Actor and Director also give stereotypical responses, with Director even turning to Female Actor asking, “You’ve worked here before, haven’t you?” as if her affirmative alone would confirm that the theatre is diverse in its casting. This moment of the play thus almost seems like a performance of race or Native American ritual; particularly with its blatant use of “tribal” as a descriptive term. Although this section of the play is imaginative in form, it limits itself to a white feminist focus where intersectional questions are not addressed, and the raced connotations of “tribal” are not discussed.

Scene Four: The Discouragement

¹⁵⁴ Hickson, *The Writer*, 62.

¹⁵⁵ *The Writer*, 34.

Men make their return in Scene Four, which begins with Director's reentrance and his line, "That's not it"¹⁵⁶ referring to Scene Three. Director confirms that the previous sequence was a staging of another scene from Writer's new play, as the audience realizes that Scene Four is now meant to mirror the conversation between Female Actor and Male Actor playing Young Woman and Older Man in Scene One. Scene Three is the scene Writer wanted to write all along; a "rant" that breaks form and focuses on "staged female experience." The Writer and Director thus proceed to discuss Scene Three just as they discussed Scene One during the staged Q & A. In the same way the audience did not know if the opening part of Scene One was part of Writer's play, the audience is similarly surprised to discover that Scene Three is, once again, meant to be another section from Writer's play. This sense of meta-theatricality only enhances the audience's understanding of levels of performance. It is impossible to realize that particular sections of Hickson's work are meant to represent moments from Writer's play until the moments are over, leaving the audience to repeatedly reevaluate their ability to suspend disbelief and their expectations of naturalism.

Writer and Director directly engage with these questions of theatrical expectation. While Director insists that what Writer has written is "not real" and a poor piece of theatre, Writer again insists, as she does in Scene One, that it is only poor theatre within Director's own definition of theatre. She concedes that what she wrote is "not real. It's a play;" complaining about "good" theatrical works that insist on their reality:

Two people, you and me, standing on stage, intellectual back-and-forth is dialectic, one oppressing the other, it's wordy, it's Stoppard, it's Pinter, it's power struggle, it's patriarchy.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Hickson, *The Writer*, 66.

¹⁵⁷ *The Writer*, 67.

Director insists that this is “the definition of good drama” to which Writer replies, “Exactly!”¹⁵⁸ Men like Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter have come to define what is considered “good” drama, as Writer sums up the history of British drama as “power struggle, it’s patriarchy.” It is precisely this reason that she does not want to continue utilizing male-defined forms, as Hickson and McIntyre themselves stated in an interview how they did not want *The Writer* to say something “easy” or to be structurally simple like Noel Coward’s “easy” comedy of manners.¹⁵⁹ Writer, and Hickson, are perfectly aware that their work is not real, but art. Writer does not wish to relegate herself to patriarchal definitions or to a structure that will be commercially marketable and successful. Instead, she insists that her work is “not real”—holding no illusions regarding the existence of performance and artifice in daily life, let alone performance and artifice in the theatre.

Director cannot seem to wrap his head around such a concept. He refers to the new section of the play as “atmospheric,” but insists that it is not “*doing anything*.”¹⁶⁰ For him, the reality of the situation is that the production must sell tickets, telling Writer that if this fact is “too much reality for your delicate artist soul then take a hike.” Director’s reality is money and money alone, as capitalism grounds him in something solid and unchangeable that forms some sort of stable reality. He is unwilling to look beyond for what is “mythic” or representative of something other than the “practical” financial system upon which his livelihood depends. Director’s only explanation for Writer’s behavior is that she is following the “trend” of avant-garde feminist work, and that once such a “trend” is over, Writer will

¹⁵⁸ Hickson, *The Writer*, 67.

¹⁵⁹ Holly Williams, “Dismantle Capitalism and Overturn the Patriarchy: Why the Writer Is More Than Just a #MeToo Play,” *The Independent*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/the-writer-metoo-romola-garai-ella-hickson-blanche-mcintyre-almeida-theatre-london-a8319561.html>.

¹⁶⁰ *The Writer*, 69.

resort to a play with a “male protagonist and good-old fashioned commercial naturalism.”¹⁶¹ He thus spends the majority of the conversation asserting his positive and guiding influence, explaining how he wants to “make you [Writer]” into “the best version of yourself.”¹⁶² This image of Writer as clay that only Director can mold to perfection again asserts Director’s directorial power over Writer’s personal life. Many of his lines in this section begin with “you know” referring to Writer (“You know the first scene is the best”), as he essentially speaks for her and verifies what he, himself, believes to be true. He is, therefore, caught off-guard when Writer asks him if he is scared that “the future might speak a language that you [Director] can’t understand”¹⁶³— that the world could revolve around a discourse that men like Director have not defined and created for themselves.

Despite Writer’s ability to finally challenge Director in Part Four— critiquing not only his theatrical beliefs but asserting her own fluid sexuality and the fact that she turned Director’s offer of sex down— she still says how he is “the only thing that makes sense. That makes [her] feel like [she has] a home,” and that he is her “size.”¹⁶⁴ Even after her experience with women in a place where she finally felt “found” and accepted, she still places a certain reliance on Director who, in some manner, is the only other person her “size.” Whether this refers to their mutual attention and affection for the theatre or her identification with his patriarchal position is not made clear, but it is still evident that she wishes to maintain whatever connection there is between them. She admits that she needs to “feel safe” to make her art, and that while she knows Director cannot look after her, she is left wishing that he would. However, the only safety he can provide is financially based. Part Four thus ends with

¹⁶¹ Hickson, *The Writer*, 70.

¹⁶² *The Writer*, 68.

¹⁶³ *The Writer*, 70.

¹⁶⁴ *The Writer*, 72.

Writer's open-ended decision to either take the monetary safety she knows she can get, or to stick to her belief that money "is not safe at all."

Scene Five: A Futile Reversal

Part Five, then, shows that the decision has been made. In the same manner as Scene Two, Writer and Female Actor stand center stage as the set is constructed around them. The set is now described as the "*West End version of the apartment from Part Two*" where the commercialism of the environment should be palpable. Whereas Male Actor/Boyfriend was able to relax during the construction, expecting his life to simply fall into place around him, both Writer and Female Actor/Girlfriend are meant to "*look ill at ease, standing static*" as the set is built. Hickson also specifies that Girlfriend should be a "version" of Writer's partner in Scene Three, and that both women should now appear as "*hot, hipster, versions of their previous selves*." She concludes her opening stage directions with the note, "*We should, if possible, get the sense the DIRECTOR has directed the scene.*"¹⁶⁵ Therefore, it is clear that Writer has chosen stability as defined by Director. She has accepted his offer and his overarching role in her life, and simultaneously has accepted her role as actress in Director's life-size play. While her financial success may be her own, Director is still able to seize upon her achievement as *his* own. It is this scene in particular that Writer is reduced to nothing more than a character in a life that is not under her own control. She is the ultimate actress: following the script Director has laid out for her in an apartment Director has designed.

Girlfriend/Female Actor is unlike Boyfriend/Male Actor. Writer and Girlfriend feel a sense of "contentment" with one another and, more than once during the scene, have "*good sex, the best we've seen. They know what is good and they get it done.*"¹⁶⁶ Not all of Writer's

¹⁶⁵ Hickson, *The Writer*, 75.

¹⁶⁶ *The Writer*, 75.

personal exploration in Scene Three is lost. She now comfortably lives with a woman instead of a man, and she appreciates the “sameness” that she first discovered and learned to appreciate in Scene Three. Writer even whispers “I love you” when Girlfriend leaves the room, not feeling that she has to assert it as a fact or as a bargaining point like she did with Boyfriend. This time, it is Writer who asks Girlfriend to marry her. Therefore, Writer’s sense of conventionality is not overturned or simply absent as she says it is in Scene Two, but rather is revived with her female partner. The audience member or reader is thus left to question exactly how subversive Writer’s homosexuality is meant to be when everything around her—from her apartment to her request for marriage to the dominating sense of Director’s presence— screams of conventional capitalism and commercialism.

However, this notion is complicated when Girlfriend brings up the question of children. Writer makes it clear that children are not her first priority— particularly ones that would come from her own body. Girlfriend mentions how using sperm from Writer’s brother would result in a child that could have the same genetics as both Girlfriend and Writer. Writer is, again, firmly opposed to such a thought. While she is conventional in some ways, Writer still finds it difficult to embrace roles of motherhood. Writer even comments to Girlfriend how Writer “feel[s] like I’m your [Girlfriend’s] dad sometimes [...] in slacks and a cardigan [...] watching you [Girlfriend] have fun before I retire to my office.”¹⁶⁷ Writer stands above Girlfriend as she says this, forcing Girlfriend to “*look up at her*” to say, “That’s messed up.” These particular lines and their specific staging begin to suggest exactly what is so drastically different between Scene Two and Scene Five. Hickson has repositioned Writer in the male role previously occupied by Boyfriend in Scene Two: Writer is the one who

¹⁶⁷ Hickson, *The Writer*, 79.

proposes, who possesses the more significant job, who does not want children, and who feels like a father. This new “role” is additionally emphasized when, after sex, Writer lays on the couch with her hands behind her head prompting Girlfriend to say, “You’re such a John [...] The kind of guy that puts his hands behind his head like that after he makes someone come. You want a high-five?”¹⁶⁸ While both women are essentially making fun of this stereotype, Writer still embraces it— even accepting Girlfriend’s offer of a high-five. This raises the question if what Writer is doing is a “punishable”¹⁶⁹ subversion of gender as Butler describes, or if Writer has subconsciously adopted a performance of maleness modelled largely after Director.

Hickson answers such a question as Scene Five continues and Writer and Girlfriend decide to have sex again. This time, though, Writer agrees to try out a pegging penis. Girlfriend has evidently been coaxing Writer into using prosthetics for a while, as Writer makes her aversion to prosthetics clear since she does not “think we can make anything better than what we were born with.”¹⁷⁰ This statement upholds the celebration of the female sex Writer encounters in Scene Three. Writer found solace and freedom in the “natural” world of Semele and women. It is not surprising, then, that she is hesitant to introduce something artificial and thoroughly masculine into their female-centric space. However, Writer still acquiesces to Girlfriend’s suggestion. Hickson’s stage direction describes how the prosthetic penis should have “*real presence*” and should “*suck all the air out of the room. It should be a dark colour—dark blue or black—not pink or purple or red.*”¹⁷¹ Her direction codes the penis as something sinister. It is not meant to resemble a brightly colored sex toy

¹⁶⁸ Hickson, *The Writer*, 79.

¹⁶⁹ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 522.

¹⁷⁰ *The Writer*, 82.

¹⁷¹ *The Writer*, 82.

meant specifically for women— as indicated by the fact that it should not be a “girly” color like pink or red—but should look dark and is unable to be ignored. In production, the actors and audience were silent the moment Girlfriend brought it onstage. After staring at it for a few moments, the women move to the couch to try it out. Girlfriend uses it first on Writer who, after only a few seconds, “*gets out of there as fast as she can [...] bit[ing] back tears of not belonging.*”¹⁷² Though Girlfriend is still female and is in some manner connected with Writer’s sexual partner from Scene Three, the introduction of even a fake penis makes Writer suddenly feel out of place and insecure. When Writer is again designated as the female in this heterosexual-like sexual encounter, she suddenly loses a sense of belonging her female partner has apparently given her.

However, Writer almost immediately states, “I can use it. I’m sure I can use it”¹⁷³ on Girlfriend, and proceeds to do so in a manner that lacks all “*connection, the concentration is all logistical— and focused on the groin area.*” Girlfriend, in the midst of sex, has to remind Writer, “You can still look at me.” As soon as a penis is introduced into their relationship, all connection between the partners ceases. Girlfriend tries to revive a sense of relationship between them and continues speaking until Writer asks, “Can you stop talking?” The stage direction that follows indicates:

*Silence from the GIRLFRIEND. The WRITER starts enjoying it. She’s really going for it— there’s something strangely aggressive about it [...] the GIRLFRIEND has all but evaporated. The WRITER comes. The GIRLFRIEND does not.*¹⁷⁴

It is this moment in particular that most complicates and confuses precisely what message Hickson hopes to create with the work as a whole. Scene Three initially appears as Hickson’s

¹⁷² Hickson, *The Writer*, 84.

¹⁷³ *The Writer*, 85.

¹⁷⁴ *The Writer*, 85.

most decisive thesis: that there is some type of essential womanhood that women need to recognize and achieve through new theatrical forms. However, Hickson's focus on performance becomes all-encompassing in these final moments of the play as the prosthetic penis seems to transform the Writer into a man. Writer's sense of innate womanliness dissolves once she adopts a penis, as if wearing an artificial version of the biological essence of manhood is, somehow, a transforming factor of gender identity.

The audience member or reader is thus left questioning exactly how Hickson perceives gender— whether it is something innate as explored in Scene Three, whether it is expressly connected to biology as seen with the adoption of the penis, or if, like Butler, Hickson reduces gender to nothing but a performance. Hickson's message was fairly clear in Scene Three with the celebration of “sameness” and returning to one's natural state of femaleness, and her exploration of the effects of gender performativity on this inherent sense of femaleness also was continuous and logical until this particular moment. What this section of the play seems to indicate is that penis is synonymous to patriarchal male: whoever has the penis has the power. What then, of the nuanced examination of performativity and the construction of gender Hickson creates in her earlier scenes? Perhaps Writer's adoption of the penis is her adoption of the ultimate performance of masculinity— one in which she dons the penis like she dons her father-like cardigan to perform male aggression. The biological/anatomical aspect of the penis, however, complicates this explanation. Writer still possesses a vagina even with the prosthetic penis, so it is difficult to understand exactly what Hickson means to convey when Writer begins “enjoying” this experience.

The play ends with an awkwardness between Writer and Girlfriend. Girlfriend does not mention feeling uncomfortable during their sexual encounter, even when Writer admits

that it is “horrible” to think about ever becoming sexually involved with a woman bigger than her. Girlfriend proceeds to make tea in a manner that is “*unexpected and strangely wife-like*,”¹⁷⁵ as she now logically adopts the wifely counterpart to Writer’s new manly, penis-possessing sense of masculinity. In the final monologue of the play, Girlfriend tells a story of Picasso painting *Guernica* up on a ladder while two of his lovers intensely fought below him. Girlfriend narrates the story in a playful, mocking way that is as nonchalant and childlike as the way she nibbles on a cookie. The play ends with Girlfriend casually asking Writer, “Do you want a biscuit?” as an image of *Guernica* flashes on the stage. Writer “*stares— horrified, haunted*”¹⁷⁶ as the curtain comes down.

Conclusion: Unbounded?

Critical reception of the work was, unsurprisingly, very mixed. It is a work that polarized audiences, with Andrzej Lukowski from *TimeOut* calling it “so devastatingly perceptive that I almost felt my flesh being ripped off my bones,”¹⁷⁷ and Lloyd Evans from *The Spectator* referring to it as “narcissistic hypochondria” and a “futile ac[t] of self-punishment.”¹⁷⁸ Critics were similarly most concerned with the ending and the overall message Hickson wants to leave the casual theatregoer with as they reenter the streets of London. Helen Lewis from *NewStatesmanAmerica* believed the ending corroborated Butler’s theories, stating how the prosthetic penis shows how “it’s not some innate property of the Y chromosome which creates sex inequality, and therefore gender roles could plausibly flip one

¹⁷⁵ Hickson, *The Writer*, 86.

¹⁷⁶ *The Writer*, 88.

¹⁷⁷ Andrzej Lukowski, “The Writer’ Review: Theatre in London,” *Time Out*, April 25, 2018, <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/the-writer-review>.

¹⁷⁸ Lloyd Evans, “A Dated and Remote Two-Hour Polemic Basking in #MeToo Topicality: The Writer Reviewed,” *The Spectator*, May 5, 2018, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/05/a-dated-and-remote-two-hour-polemic-basking-in-metoo-topicality-the-writer-reviewed/>.

day.”¹⁷⁹ Patrick Marmion from *Spiked* agreed, summing up Hickson’s message as: “give a girl a phallus and she’s no better than a bloke.”¹⁸⁰

How radical is Hickson’s work, then, when the message is so easily essentialized and simplified? It was difficult assessing this work as little-to-no critical analysis has been written about Hickson as a playwright, but I thought it was important to begin looking at *The Writer* from a critical and feminist theory perspective beyond theatrical reviews. While Hickson’s work deals with far more than the representation of the actress on the stage, the questions it raises all contribute to contemporary discourses on feminist theatre, of which the actress is an intrinsic and necessary part. Butler explains how, “without human beings whose various acts, largely construed, produce and maintain oppressive conditions, those conditions would fall away.” Therefore, “the transformation of social relations becomes a matter, then, of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions.”¹⁸¹ If Hickson’s work accomplishes anything, it is the ability of *The Writer* to represent the need for attack on what Butler describes as “hegemonic social conditions”—one must literally dismantle capitalism and overturn the patriarchy if the actress or female playwright wishes for any sense of freedom in the theatre.

At the end of the play, it is impossible to tell what is Hickson, what is Writer, and what is character. After two hours of constant reminders that not everything in theatre is what it seems, it is hard to know what Writer is or what Hickson intends her to be as Writer stares, horrified, at her now wife-like Girlfriend and the large projection of *Guernica*. The

¹⁷⁹ Helen Lewis, "The Writer at the Almeida: A Drama Which Tries to Have Its Meaning-Cake and Eat It," *New Statesman*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/music-theatre/2018/04/writer-almeida-drama-which-tries-have-its-meaning-cake-and-eat-it>.

¹⁸⁰ Patrick Marmion, "The #MeToo Era Needs Some Hippy Spirit," *Spiked*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.spiked-online.com/2018/05/02/the-metoo-era-needs-some-hippy-spirit/>.

¹⁸¹ Butler, "Performative Acts," 525.

boundaries are officially blurred, and no one— not even the written characters of the play in a Pirandello-like fashion— know what to do with themselves. Though Hickson only describes the third scene of the play as “staged female experience,” it is through viewing *The Writer* in its entirety that one can grasp the multifarious and challenging existence that is being a woman in 2018.

Conclusion

While studying abroad in England spring semester of 2018, I had the privilege of seeing the opening run of *The Writer* at the Almeida theatre. I had seen advertisements for the show and had heard it was controversial, but was told to ignore reviews and discussions of the plot until I had seen the production. Without any expectations or presumptions, I attended one of the final performances with a friend and stayed for the Q & A after it was over.

When the show ended, I was intrigued and conflicted. After such a nuanced deconstruction of theatrical and gender conventions, the last moments of the final scene left me unsatisfied. The visuals of the falling set pieces in Scene Two and the prosthetic penis in Scene Five were striking and shocking, giving the work gusto and power. It was a visceral experience, particularly with Scene Three, and it provoked my thoughts as to my own preconceived notions and expectations of the theatre. The literal stripping of the theatrical layers and the introduction of the live baby were unique and memorable moments of exceptional theatre, and are permanently branded on my mind. *The Writer* had things to say, and said many of them with finesse and appropriate spectacle. However, I still left unsure of Hickson's thesis or how she suggested we view gender beyond the fact that it is performative. The Q & A was unfortunately no help in increasing my understanding and interpretation, as the actors' discussion and the audience's questions focused far more on the critical reception of the work rather than on what the work itself was trying to say. I was surprised at one of the actor's comments, who said something along the lines of, "I've never read a more political play." I felt as if the intricate, layered work I had just witnessed was suddenly reduced and categorized. With the many important female playwrights before

Hickson, this idealization of her work diminished my respect for the play and the actors in it, making me question if what I saw was important or simply a play written not to create dialogue, but controversy. I dismissed it as a frustrating evening of theatre, assuming I would never think about or revisit this work again.

I wanted to focus on dramatic literature for my thesis— specifically two or three plays spanning many decades with female actress characters. I also wanted to apply Butler's theory and examine it in relation to actresses who quite literally theatricalize their gender for a living. After discovering *Hay Fever*, a play representative of and in dialogue with the women's movements of the 1920s, I felt something contemporary dealing with modern women's movements would be an interesting and welcome contrast. I enrolled in a feminist theory course to better educate myself on the ways to read and discuss feminist theory in relation to the texts I was interested in, and was reminded of *The Writer*. It was through my exploration of liberal, radical, Marxian, and psychoanalytic feminist theory that I saw *The Writer* in a new light and as an interesting jumping off point for the discoveries I hoped to make in my thesis. Revisiting the play in text form, I perceived the important and critical ways it engaged with modern discourse on gender, capitalism, and feminist theory. It presents all three as interlinked, and questions the proclamations and intricacies of multiple gender theorists throughout the five distinct scenes. Considering my desire was to focus on the female actress and the way she is represented in the dramatic literature of modern England, I reconsidered and realized that this play— one that I had actually seen this year— was an appropriate candidate for my desired analysis. It has proved a thought-provoking and excellent complement to Coward's work in the 1920s, as it takes many of Coward's questions and applies them to a contemporary cultural context.

While Coward's plays are often dismissed as frivolous or "light" additions to any theatrical season, Coward's conceptions of life, reality, and gender profoundly depicted complex understandings of performance long before the connections between performance and gender were being made. He challenged prevailing norms with his particularized form of comedy of manners and helped revolutionize the theatrical scene of the new century. Though not as radical in the development of his own theatrical form as Hickson, Coward's reinvention of the comedy of manners to better critique modern British culture is not to be ignored. His comedy and sense of humor do not eradicate the possibilities for deeper meaning, but rather, in his era, made it possible for him to explore the complexities of gender and the female actress that were otherwise shunned. Hickson has gone even farther: finding a "female" theatrical form that presents something new and necessary to the development of modern English theatre. She does not attempt to work with prevailing forms as Coward did, but hopes to reject them entirely. As a woman, Hickson does not wish to simply reinterpret a male-defined theatrical form for herself, but wants to create a new canon for women and whatever nonsensical, "mad" work they want to make. With these playwrights, the actress and the woman are not separate but representable and combined entities— with qualities that deserve recognition on the stage. Actress characters allow us to examine and create work that questions gendered reality and gendered invention in unexpected ways. Actresses are indelible parts of theatre, and these playwrights reveal how the actress can lead us to understandings about drama and life that were previously inaccessible.

Antonin Artaud explains in *The Theatre and its Double* (1938) how art and life are not separate entities, but are intrinsically and permanently connected.¹⁸² Coward and

¹⁸² Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

Hickson show how the actress perfectly exemplifies this connection; bridging the gap between what we sometimes understand as two separate ways of looking at the world. Reality and art are combined within the female performer, and it is with continued attention to her perspective that we will gain new understandings of gender, theatre, life in art, and art in life.

Bibliography

- "About: History and Vision." Me Too Movement. 2018. Accessed October 25, 2018.
<https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history>.
- Artaud, Antonin. 2004. *The Theater and Its Double*. New York: Grove Press.
- Aston, Elaine, and Janelle Reinelt. 2000. "A Century in View: From Suffrage to the 1990s."
 In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Playwrights*, 1–20. Cambridge
 Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- "The Building." Almeida Theatre. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://almeida.co.uk/the-building>.
- Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in
 Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519–31.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." In *The Second Wave: A Reader
 in Feminist Theory*, edited by Linda Nicholson, 300-16. New York: Routledge.
- Cixous, Hélène. 1976. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs* 1 (4): 875–93.
- Coward, Noël. 1947. *Present Indicative: An Autobiography*. New York: Doubleday.
- Coward, Noël. 1999. *Hay Fever*. In *Noël Coward Collected Plays: One*, 1–72. Methuen
 World Classics. London: Methuen.
- Davis, Tracy C. 1991. "The Social Dynamic and 'Respectability.'" In *Actresses as Working
 Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, 69–104. Gender and Performance.
 London: Routledge.
- . 1991. "The Socioeconomic Organization of the Theatre." In *Actresses as Working
 Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture*, 3–35. Gender and Performance.
 London: Routledge.

Dolan, Jill. 2010. "Gay and Lesbian Lives and Ideas in the Twentieth Century." In *Theatre & Sexuality*, 5–19. Theatre&. New York: Palgrave.

———. 2013. "Introduction." In *The Feminist Spectator in Action: Feminist Criticism for the Stage and Screen*, 1–14. New York: Palgrave.

"Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre in Conversation: The Writer." Interview by Stephanie Bain. Youtube. June 26, 2018. Accessed November 30, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJZi5xCfspQ>.

"Ella Hickson." Drama Online. 2018. Accessed November 21, 2018. <https://www.dramaonline.com/playwrights/ella-hickson-iid-134885>.

Evans, Lloyd. "A Dated and Remote Two-Hour Polemic Basking in #MeToo Topicality: The Writer Reviewed." *The Spectator*. May 5, 2018. Accessed December 11, 2018.

<https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/05/a-dated-and-remote-two-hour-polemic-basking-in-metoo-topicality-the-writer-reviewed/>.

Gardner, Viv. 1992. "Introduction." In *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, edited by Vivien Gardner and Susan Rutherford, 1–16. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP.

Hickson, Ella. 2018. *The Writer*. London: NHB.

Hirst, David L. 1979. *Comedy of Manners*. The Critical Idiom 40. London: Methuen.

"Home." Time's Up Now. 2017. Accessed November 14, 2018.

<https://www.timesupnow.com/home#into-anchor>.

Jones, Alice. "Ella Hickson: A Playwright Who Grabs the Zeitgeist." *The Independent*. April

- 6, 2011. Accessed December 12, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/ella-hickson-a-playwright-who-grabs-the-zeitgeist-2263433.html>.
- Lahr, John. 1982. "Comedies of Bad Manners." In *Coward the Playwright*, 38–91. London: Methuen.
- Leggatt, Alexander. 1998. *English Stage Comedy 1490-1990: Five Centuries of a Genre*. London: Routledge.
- Lewis, Helen. "The Writer at the Almeida: A Drama Which Tries to Have Its Meaning-Cake and Eat It." *New Statesman*. April 26, 2018. Accessed December 12, 2018. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/music-theatre/2018/04/writer-almeida-drama-which-tries-have-its-meaning-cake-and-eat-it>.
- Lukowski, Andrzej. "'The Writer' Review: Theatre in London." *Time Out*. April 25, 2018. Accessed December 13, 2018. <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/the-writer-review>.
- Marmion, Patrick. "The #MeToo Era Needs Some Hippy Spirit." *Spiked*. May 2, 2018. Accessed December 17, 2018. <https://www.spiked-online.com/2018/05/02/the-metoo-era-needs-some-hippy-spirit/>.
- Postlewait, Thomas. 2007. "George Edwardes and Musical Comedy: The Transformation of London Theatre and Society, 1878-1914." In *The Performing Century: Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History*, edited by Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland, 80–102. Refining British Theatre History. New York: Palgrave.
- Russell, Jacqui. 1999. "Chronology." In *Noël Coward Collected Plays: One*, xxvi–xxxiii. Methuen World Classics. London: Methuen.

- Schweitzer, Marlis. 2005. "'The Mad Search for Beauty': Actresses' Testimonials, the Cosmetics Industry, and the 'Democratization of Beauty.'" *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 4 (3): 255–92.
- Sinfield, Alan. 1991. "Private Lives/Public Theater: Noel Coward and the Politics of Homosexual Representation." *Representations* (36): 43–63.
- Thompson, Jessie. "Ella Hickson on Writing, Confidence and Being Part of the Conversation." *Evening Standard*. April 17, 2018. Accessed December 2, 2018. <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/ella-hickson-i-always-want-to-be-in-the-conversation-with-whats-being-made-now-in-theatre-a3816371.html>.
- Wandor, Michelene. 1984. "The Impact of Feminism on the Theatre." *Feminist Review* (18): 76-92. doi:10.2307/1394862.
- . 2000. "Women Playwrights and the Challenge of Feminism in the 1970s." In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, edited by Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt, 53–68. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Williams, Holly. "'Dismantle Capitalism and Overturn the Patriarchy': Why the Writer Is More Than Just a #MeToo Play." *The Independent*. April 24, 2018. Accessed December 12, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/the-writer-metoo-romola-garai-ella-hickson-blanche-mcinture-almeida-theatre-london-a8319561.html>.