

Feminist Theatre

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Feminist writing of the 1970s and 1980s has the rising of women's (and society's) consciousness as central to the social and political movement. A coalition of social activists, theorists, artists, historians, and critics evolved whose aim is to understand modes of perception, psychological factors, and patterns of thought.

In writing for the theatre, feminist playwrights introduced new subjects, vocabularies, characters, forms, and alternative modes of perception. First, feminist writers moved drama's boundaries, taking as subject a revisionist approach to women's roles in dramatic texts. Feminist plays identify the psychological, social, cultural, and educational controls to which women are subject. Hence, the plays have a consciousness-raising function. Both feminist playwrights and critics purposely set about to construct new critical models and dramatic methods to accommodate the presence of women in art, to reveal the cultural fictions of the female gender, and to expose the historic "valorization" of the male gender in history and literature. The result was, especially in France, England, and the United States, a new mode of writing for the theatre. Led by such playwrights as Simone Benmussa, Helene Cixous, Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, Adrienne Kennedy, and Maria Irene Fornes, women emerged in drama as subjects rather than objects. Further, these writers concentrated by and large on women's alienation and repression in modern society.

In *Cloud Nine* (1979) Caryl Churchill illustrates women's social and cultural alienation created by distinctions between the "real" woman and how she is perceived as the "other" in a male-dominated society. In Act One, Betty, the wife-mother, is played by a male actor in drag. Betty, the female "character," is, therefore, everything men want her to be since her social identity is a fiction of the male gaze. By substituting the male actor for the female, no real woman exists under the layers of costume, makeup, and gesture. Churchill's point about the "colonizing" of women, the privilege of gender and class, is doubly reinforced by actor-in-costume and character-in-fiction in *Cloud Nine*.

Maria Irene Fornes in *The Conduct of Life*, first produced in New York in 1985, presents three views of women's victimization in a patriarchal culture dominated by a South American petty tyrant who is both a soldier and husband. Moreover, she also shows men as equally conditioned and victimized by historical social forces and prescribed gender roles. Orlando's "wife" and his "housekeeper" are objects of his domestic needs and tranquility while his "slave," a twelve-year-old female prisoner, is the object of his sexual desire. The domestic unit in *The Conduct of Life* is a

political microcosm for a tyrannical, male-dominated class system characterized by destructiveness, aggressiveness, and victimization. The system transforms women (and also men) into creatures who are conditioned to engage in betrayal, aggression, and violence. In Fornes' view, all (women and men) are objects and victims of patriarchy.

In revolt against Freudian theories of sexuality which emphasize male development, feminist writers rejected traditions of western psychiatry and elevated women from a subordinate, derivative, and apolitical position in the family unit in particular and in society in general. Many feminist plays take as their setting woman's time-honored environs, the domestic setting: living room, dining room, kitchen, bedroom. Within the family unit, women are portrayed as confined to the domestic setting, dependent upon husband and other male companions, and denied opportunities for growth and change.

As seen in epic and absurdist writing for the theater, new perspectives require new dramatic forms. Evolving new forms, feminist writers rejected a linear, forward-moving action in favor of *contiguity*, or a series of scenes in continuous connection. Drama's forms in feminist writing abandon hierarchical organizing principles of traditional playwriting which proceed from complication to climax to resolution. Feminists argue that this type of plot organization is tied to the male experience; that is, it is phallogentric. Women's experience, they argue, are rather disjointed, broken, and disconnected without clear lines of development.

If there is a discernible dramatic structure for feminist plays, it is deduced from female biology and from the feminine sexual experience. Feminist play structure has a contiguous organization characterized by fragmentary scenes, elliptical forms, indirect dialogue, ambiguity rather than clarity, and interrupted rather than completed action. One basic argument for recurrent line of dramatic action is that women's lives are in themselves fragmented; their experience of time and relationships is one of constant interruption. In general, women experience as thousand demands on their time, attention, and energy throughout a single day. In the domestic world these activities include household chores, errands, meals, purchases, car pools, child care, and so on. Consequently, plays written from their perspective are shaped by contiguous scenes that show these myriad demands and frenetic behavior-responses as one demand after the next is met. On another level, dramatic form and language as presented by feminist writers raise large issues about women's lives, such as gender, race, and class. In *The Conduct of Life* Maria Irene Fornes represents the attitudes, conditions, and demands of the contemporary world on individuals of both sexes, all of whom are victims of socially conditioned attitudes regarding gender roles and class distinctions.