The Doll House Show: A Feminist Theory Play

Gayle Austin

In February, 1992, I watched in amazement as a capacity house watched a play I had conceived and compiled. The piece, *The Doll House Show*, is a feminist theory play and the thing I had hoped would happen did—the audience laughed. At least some of the audience laughed. The other amazing aspect was the size and composition of the audience. There were students and faculty, punkers and members of the women's community of Atlanta. On one thing many of them agreed—a live-action Barbie is funny.

The Doll House Show is the second in a series of plays I am writing in this genre I call the feminist theory play. I am working in live performance along the lines of the avant-garde theory film, described by E. Ann Kaplan in her 1983 book *Women & Film*. In describing women's films at that point in time, she outlined three broad categories: "First, the formalist, experimental, avant-garde film; second, the realist political and sociological documentary; and third, what I call the avant-garde theory (political) film" (87). In describing the roots of this third category, she stated, "The avant-garde theory film comes out of Brecht, Russian directors like Eisenstein and Pudovkin . . . and, most recently, the French New Wave movement, especially Godard, in his post-1968 phase, and Straub-Huillet" (87). Kaplan goes on in the book to describe several examples of this genre and generalizes about aspects they have in common. Among their traits are the facts that they: "focus on the cinematic apparatus as a signifying practice," "position the spectator so that s/he has to involved in the processes of the film," "try to replace pleasure in recognition with pleasure in learning," and "mix documentary and fiction" (138). She continues by cautioning:

> The danger of semiology has been the "sliding away from the referent." . . . the best theory films do not abandon the referent, and exist in a deliberate tension (created through the combining of documentary and fictional modes) with the social formation. . . . (140)

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Since 1989 I have been taking Kaplan's formulations, and her cautions, and applying them to live performance.

In striving to bridge the gaps between theory and practice, feminism and theatre, I decided to take texts produced by the dominant ideology and disrupt them with other types of text, particularly theoretical feminism. The first feminist theory play I wrote and directed was "Resisting the Birth Mark" (January, 1990), in which I interrupted the narrative of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" with passages from, among others, Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* (for more information on this production see my essay in the forthcoming *Upstaging Big Daddy*). The third project will be "Mildred & Stella" (May, 1993), a treatment of mothers and daughters using characters from the films *Mildred Pierce* and *Stella Dallas*, the road/buddy aspect of *Thelma & Louise*, shades of *Persona*, a recurring singing duo based on The Judds, and pieces of feminist psychology and film theory.

The second play, "The Doll House Show," is a deconstruction of Ibsen's *A Doll House*, using pieces of feminist theory, George Burns and Gracie Allen comedy routines, information about Gracie, the Barbie doll, and about the woman who is thought by some to Ibsen's model for the character of Nora. According to Ibsen biographer Michael Meyer, Laura Kieler did forge a check to save her husband's life, but when he found and castigated her, she had a nervous breakdown and was put in a mental asylum. After a month there, she asked to return to her husband and children and was accepted back by him. I was struck by the ironies in this contrast between "real" women's experience and that of the "Woman" on the stage, and the much closer correspondence between the "real" experience and the easily dismissed "happy ending" Ibsen wrote for a German production whose actress refused to play the part as originally written. In that version, Nora stayed "for the sake of the children." I used both endings in my play.

I conceived "Doll House" in the spring of 1990, just after closing "Birth Mark." Over the spring and summer of 1991 I did research, with the help of Deb Calabria, the graduate student who later directed the production. At first I conceived the piece as a three-part, full evening (Austin, "Creating a Feminist Theatre Environment" 53). The production slot available that season was for a one-act, so I condensed my diverse ideas into a single, hour-length act. By early fall I began pasting pieces of text onto 3x5 cards and arranging them into pages, alternating "Doll House" text, non-dramatic text, and stage directions. A first draft was xeroxed, read aloud, and massively cut. In November the play was cast, adding at that point a live Barbie because one had showed up at auditions. The company of six women and three men played a variety of roles, including two "Noras" and two "Gracies." Over a five week rehearsal period, the actors

improvised, stage business was vastly expanded from my early, minimal indications of what would happen, and the performance text took shape.

Through various theatricalist production means, the diverse threads of narrative and knots of theory were woven into a performance collage. A major device was the use of environmental staging, with the audience divided by gender and each group guided along a separate path of performances in the auditorium, onstage, and in a hallway backstage. Male and female experiences of the play differed in very basic, visible ways, echoing the division of experience by gender so prominent in the nineteenth century, which continues into our own.

The play begins with the entire audience in the lobby and a carnival barker delivering an actual "geek spiel," describing the terrible, animal-like woman they are bout to see on the inside. He ends by saying, "Ladies first," and opening the door for the women in the audience to enter. Just inside the door is an actress, standing like a statue exhibit, with a sign saying "Nora" on her chest. While the men remain in the lobby to hear a male tour guide deliver information about Laura Kieler from Meyer's book, the women audience enter the auditorium to see actresses posed as "Laura," "Nora," and "Gracie" exhibits and hear a female tour guide deliver information about Kieler written by feminist critic Joan Templeton. Later the men enter the auditorium and hear an "Ibsen" exhibit come to life and deliver some "Notes for the Modern Tragedy" from Ibsen's notebooks, while the women walk up onto the stage, sit in the stage right wings, and hear their tour guide speak, among other texts, Carolyn Heilbrun's words about writing a woman's life.

Throughout the first half of the play, the two audiences experience guided gender separation and are addressed by a member of their own gender using texts authored (for the most part) by members of that gender. In our production, sound from one side spilled into the other most of the time, but neither could be sure just what the other group was hearing. Later in the piece the gender separation was not enforced, as the audience stood where they chose on the stage and then filed back into the auditorium. Even without the tour guides, we found that a majority went back to the sides of the auditorium they had occupied earlier. Judging from the audience members I spoke with, the experience of being divided by gender was the part of the play that made the deepest impact on the greatest number of individuals.

During the middle section of the play, women sit on stage right, men stage left, but the only thing separating them is a free-standing door unit (which, of course, gets slammed—more than once). At one point, women are led from "women's world" through "men's world" (as the director took to calling them) and out into a hallway to witness "Laura" having an hysterical fit. Then she and the other actresses perform some of Elaine Showalter's text on the treatment of

nineteenth-century hysteria in women. At the same time the men hear, among other things, Balzac's aphorisms on marriage. From the point when the women return to the stage, there are no longer any guides encouraging gender division. The stage breaks into a chaotic scene of movement and tossed out sentences, actors move among audience members, and the audience is encouraged back into the auditorium for the final section of the play.

The longest scene of the play is an elaboration into a production number of the brief tarantella danced by Nora in Ibsen's second act, including Laura hanging from a rope and both Noras and one Gracie dancing to text by Catherine Clement, which celebrates and explains the tarantella as a form of women's expression under oppression. At the end of the play the women, as stagehands, push a large doll house set piece offstage, the men take a curtain call, and the women do not. At our production the audience continued to clap and then fell into silence most nights. One evening some women were so enraged that the actresses did not get a curtain call that they went into the women's dressing room to give them their ovation.

In the fall of 1992 I met Nelly Furman at a conference. That experience gave me several insights into what I am trying to do. I went back to an essay she wrote, "Textual Feminism," published in 1980. In it Furman discusses semiotics and gives as the aim of textual criticism "to explode the unity of the sign, to threaten the comfortable relationship between signifier and signified" (48). This was certainly one of my aims, as I used excerpts from each of Ibsen's three acts in widely separated portions of the piece, not in the order in which they appeared in the play. Between the excerpts I placed feminist theory and descriptive information about the woman who can be seen as a referent of the signifier "Nora." Furman continues: "By forcefully playing signifier against signified, the textual critic attempts to disturb the harmony of form and content" (48).

A point Furman raises in relation to feminism is one close to my intention on this project:

> For the feminist scholar, the importance of textual criticism resides in the implications of the switch to the power of the reader. . . . the reader is not a passive consumer, but an active producer of a new text. (51-52)

By working to make women's discourse as visible and audible as men's, placing women subjects and objects at the center of the stage action, undoing seamless realism, and calling attention to the usually transparent, I endeavored to perform an act of feminist textual criticism that would invite production of the greatest

possible number of new texts by the audience. Some audience members were disturbed by this unexpected responsibility; others were empowered.

Listening to Nelly Furman deliver her paper, "Voice and Identity," in her distinctive, French-inflected voice, was a pleasurable experience for me, echoing one of the points in her paper. Later I wrote a note to myself:

> What is interesting about the best conference presentations is the bringing together of diverse sources—high and low art, various theory excerpts—spoken in the voice of the creator of this juxtaposition. It allows for the audience's free-association among the sources and creation of multiple texts as she is speaking. My pleasure in listening to conference papers is a source of the theory play. Listening is like the pleasure of listening to an operatic voice. And then I am suspicious—is it joy in hearing women use (usurp) male discourse? What is that, and why? Is it cross-dressing? Is it only possible if the listener has read the sources?

These are among the questions I continue to ask, at conferences, at the theatre, in developing "Mildred & Stella." I love to hear some pieces of theory spoken aloud. I work in the theatre, so it seemed natural to arrange to hear them spoken there. Through the feminist theory play I hope to convey some of my enthusiasm to an audience and at the same time engage them in thinking about women and feminism.

Works Cited

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