

Feminism and Dramaturgy: Musings on Multiple Meanings

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As a feminist, sometimes I like to yell the f-word in a crowded theatre conference; other times I like to be the one to make the word appear in a table of contents where it otherwise might not. The latter is my purpose here, in this section on Contemporary Issues in Dramaturgy in one of my favorite publications, the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Thank you, Sharon, for allowing me to do just that.

I have experienced raising the f-word at gatherings in several fields which have a large number of women practitioners (dance, children's theatre, costume design) and been greeted with everything from weak agreement to deafening silence. I have wondered at this response and made attempts to raise the word a bit more loudly (see "A Feminist Dialogue on Theatre for Young Audiences Through Suzan Zeder's Plays," in the Spring 1997 issue of *JDTC*). This has been in fields with which I am not directly involved, but recently I've felt the need to raise it again, in dramaturgy, where I am involved.

I am having trouble finding the f-word in the recent publications in this new, but growing, field. For instance, I scan the table of contents of *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, edited by Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl, and Michael Lupu.¹ This is the most comprehensive publication yet on the subject, but I cannot find what I am looking for in the titles of articles in the table of contents. I do find the words "Multicultural," "Children's Theater," and "Queer Aesthetic," but no "Feminist," "Gender," or even "Women." The closest I come is "Androgyne," in an essay by Tori Haring-Smith called "The Dramaturg as Androgyne: Thoughts on the Nature of Dramaturgical Collaboration." I note that as one I have to read.

I continue on in the table of contents, with my by now habitual "counting the women" among the contributors of articles. Out of a total of 49 essays, panel discussions and interviews, fifteen (30%) have at least one woman's name attached as an author. This does not surprise me and the list of names is a distinguished one: Anne Cattaneo, Jane Ann Crum, Heidi Gilpin, Tori Haring-Smith, Mira Rafalowicz, Susan Jonas, Jayme Koszyn, Elizabeth C. Ramirez, Harriet Power, Morgan Jenness, Mame Hunt, Susan Mason, Suzan L. Zeder, Susan Finque, and Elizabeth Bennett. Of the 42 single-author essays, eleven (26%) are by women. These percentages are impressively high compared with the rates of women's participation in so many other areas of life, from playwrights on Broadway to CEOs of corporations. I know the field has a good number of women

practitioners, but the treatment of women's *issues* does not seem to be very visible in the book.

I move on to the index. Here I do find the word "Feminism," as well as "Gender" and "Women." A paragraph in one essay describes feminism as one of several contemporary theatrical theories that "desire to generate change"² and a paragraph in another essay describes it as one of "several strands of contemporary practice" from which the "how-to model" of playwriting "seems far removed."³ Citations under "Gender" and "Women" begin to approach subjects like cross-gender casting and gender reversal, without using the f-word, but I am getting worried. Perhaps the time has come to yell, or at least write loudly, WHY ISN'T DRAMATURGY TALKING MORE ABOUT FEMINISM?

I, of course, have several theories about the missing word. It is assumed. It is taken for granted. It is post. Everyone in the field already is a feminist, so we don't need to discuss it. A good number of its practitioners are women, so we don't need to do any affirmative action work in that area, but in race . . . (I heard this last one from those in dance and children's theatre, too.) True enough. But I think there is something to be gained by using the word itself, by pushing a bit at the self-imposed limits in our field.

I am interested in participating in a dialogue, at meetings and in the pages of this and other journals. What comes to mind when you see the phrase, "Feminism and Dramaturgy?" What type of feminism: liberal, radical, materialist, other? And in relationship to what aspects of dramaturgy? Geoff Proehl points out three: attribute, role and function.⁴ To start this dialogue, I rearrange and rename them the profession, the process and the products (play and production), then ask some of the questions that come to my mind and, in reply, quote from a few of the essays in *Dramaturgy in American Theater*.

Feminism and the Profession of Dramaturgy

Why are there a relatively high number of female dramaturgs?

Tori Haring-Smith: "I have heard it said that the majority of production dramaturgs are women because men would never agree to do so much work for such little compensation. They would never allow themselves to be invisible For some women, work as a dramaturg is probably as close as they can hope to get to professional directing Unfortunately, for some theaters, having a woman dramaturg 'solves' the problem of how to get women on the artistic team."⁵

Mame Hunt: "I turned to dramaturgy when I couldn't get directing work, but, then, it was Chicago in the early 1980s—that was a pretty masculine theater town then. But more than that, dramaturgy is a middle-management job, and that's where women were then. I remember at the 1989 LMDA conference in San

Francisco, Bush said he hired women into middle management because he knew they'd work harder for the money than men."⁶

What is the power of women dramaturgs in the field?

Geoff Proehl: ". . . the dramaturg as **middle manager**, an institutional figure with relatively little power, who relies on the institution for sustenance, whose allegiance is to the institution not the art form or the artist. His or her agenda is to maintain a healthy subscribership."⁷

Is the dramaturg the "wife" in the theatre?

Geoff Proehl: "As a member of a dysfunctional family system, the co-dependent dramaturg, (director as husband; dramaturg as wife or child) focuses entirely and obsessively, to the point of self-abnegation, on serving the needs of others within the production process Clearly, dramaturgs do not prescribe co-dependency as an operating mode, but in a theatre structured around the power of the director, where the dramaturg is too often an entry level position, the potential for this sort of negative domestic arrangement certainly exists."⁸

Feminism and the Process of Dramaturgy

What is, or would be, a feminist methodology of doing dramaturgy?

Tori Haring-Smith: "She needs to form a kind of 'mind meld' or empathic connection with the director This kind of collaborative mind meld has been defined by several psychologists as a 'feminine' way of thinking As Carol Gilligan demonstrates, the common assumption that achieving critical distance is more sophisticated than establishing empathy or understanding, is founded on the developmental theories of Piaget and Kohlberg, both of whom did their research primarily on males Women make better androgynes than men do, being better trained to combine the empathic and distanced points of view that define a dramaturg's outlook."⁹

What is the relationship of androgyny to feminism?

Feminism and the Products of Dramaturgy

What, if any, is the relationship between the dramaturg and the idea of a "female aesthetic" in playwriting? In directing?

This remains a blank space. Come on, somebody. Write in it.

Notes

1. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu, eds., *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book* (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1997).
2. John H. Lutterbie, "Theory and the Practice of Dramaturgy," *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1997) 227.
3. Stephen Weeks, "How to Do It: A Brief History of Professional Advice," *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1997) 396.
4. Geoffrey S. Proehl, "The Images Before Us: Metaphors for the Role of the Dramaturg in American Theater," *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1997) 124.
5. Tori Haring-Smith, "The Dramaturg as Androgyne: Thoughts on the Nature of Dramaturgical Collaboration," *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1997) 143.
6. Mame Hunt and Susan Mason, "A Conversation with Mame Hunt, Dramaturg-Artistic Director, and Susan Mason, Dramaturg-Academic, 19 August 1994, Oakland," *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace, 1997) 426.
7. Proehl 133.
8. Proehl 134.
9. Haring-Smith 137–8, 140.