

VOICES IN THE WILDERNESS

JOOLS GILSON

[Published in: *The Guardian*. (1992) June 3: 17]

JOOLS GILSON bemoans the low profile of women in both theatre writing and studies of its history.

I recently received a publicity brochure for the forthcoming International Directory of Theatre. This book is described as containing “the greatest and most performed plays in world theatre”. The works of 350 authors are studied and, it boasts, these include all 37 of Shakespeare’s plays, 13 by Ibsen, nine each from Moliere and Brecht, and five from Pinter. On the back there is a list of 54 more examples to be included. There is only *one* woman, Lillian Hellman. One white, American, middle-class playwright to represent all that is “great” about women’s contribution to theatre. Such representation is, unfortunately, far from being an anomaly.

At this year’s SCUDD (Standing Committee of University Drama Departments) conference, delegates were handed a leaflet publicising a new series to be published by Cambridge University Press called Plays in Production. On this was a list of plays that were to have volumes devoted to them. There were 16; none was written by a woman. I asked the Series Editor, Professor Michael Robinson, why. It was, he replied, hard to find a woman playwright who had a production history of any length.

This is nonsense. The truth is, these playwrights are more difficult to research because their histories have not been written. Many of the women Restoration Playwrights had extensive runs, some spanning centuries. And what of our contemporary playwrights? What of Churchill and Wertebaker?

In a survey of the autumn 1991 season in Britain’s repertory and West End theatres, 13 out of 289 productions were written by women. It is often presumed the social and political climate for women will inevitably get better, but this is clearly not the case for women writing for the theatre. Between 1660 and 1720, there were more plays written by women produced in London than there were between 1920 and 1980 – years of huge social and political change for women.

Why are these figures so appalling and why are women so often ignored in the history of theatre being made today? Their exclusion is perpetuated through GCSE and A level theatre studies syllabi, drama degree courses, reference books, productions and the dearth of acting or directing opportunities for women.

Ellen Terry was one of the great actresses of the English stage; her son, Edward Gordon Craig, was an innovative stage designer and has a place in history and A level syllabi alike. Terry had another child, Edith. George Bernard Shaw once said of the brother and sister, "Gordon Craig made himself the most famous producer in Europe by dint of never producing anything, while Edith Craig remains the most obscure by dint of producing everything."

Edith Craig was indeed a vigorous producer. She was also a director, costume designer and musician. She devoted 10 years of her life to the Pioneer Players who had produced plays for the suffrage movement. Edith Craig used to say to her brother when encouraging him "Come on, Teddy, be a woman." And if he had been, would we ever have heard of him?

I am presently directing our first-year drama students in a production of Marieluise Fleisser's *Purgatory* in Ingolstadt. Written in 1924, its language moves between claustrophobic bickering to lines of lyrical beauty. Yet it is only through the efforts of Annie Castledine that the Ingolstadt plays were translated, produced and finally published in English in 1991. Described as "a major theatrical reclamation", it has taken 70 years for her voice to be heard in Britain. Her contemporary and lover, Bertolt Brecht, is everywhere.

Fleisser and Craig are modern examples of an old problem. The first woman playwright was a 10th-century German nun called Hroswitha. Rather than being eulogised as the first male playwright (the Greek tragedian Aeschylus) has been, she remains in obscurity. Edith Craig was responsible for the last professional production of one of Hroswitha's plays in Britain. The only available copy of these plays in English has been out of print since 1928.

Ten centuries of women writers for the theatre and are we doing so much better? Whose voice is being heard? And why, so often, isn't it female?

Jools Gilson is Special Lecturer in Drama at the University of Hull. Purgatory in Ingoldstadt plays at The Gulbenkian Studio.