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Feminist Theatre: A Practical Application

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Feminist Theatre: A Practical Application

By: Rosalynd Ivy Duerr

April 13, 2017

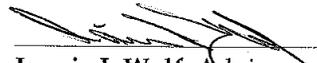
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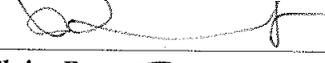
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Rosalynd Ivy Duerr

Accepted for HONORS
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)


Laurie I. Wolf, Advisor




Claire Pamment


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Williamsburg, VA

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Introduction

The marriage of feminism and theatre is a beautiful one. Of course, as a feminist and a theatre major, I don't think I could possibly have any other opinion. Last semester, in the fall of 2016, the William and Mary Theatre Department gave me the opportunity to produce and direct Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*. I had chosen the play because I thought it was fun, interesting, and clever. I also found its feminist themes, which involve women in the workplace and ask questions about whether working women can achieve personal success and happiness in a world dominated by men, extremely relevant as a student who had only before gotten glimpses into the professional world.

The arduous application process for the student directorial asked for an analysis of the play, so I did some research. I began to learn about how hard it was to be a woman in the workplace in the 1980s – and how hard it was to be a woman staying in the home in the 1980s. This lose/lose situation fascinated me. I wanted to learn more.

So began a foray into 1980s feminist theatre, which became a foray into Caryl Churchill and her contemporaries, which became the groundwork for a research paper before I had even finished the proposal for the play I wanted to direct. An honors thesis on my research, and, most importantly, my own direct experience with feminist theatre through the directorial process, already seemed to be in the works.

I learned some basic feminist history and how feminist theory and performance began to interact with each other, which I will discuss in Chapter

One. Then, I read as many Caryl Churchill plays as I could get my hands on. I discuss three of them in Chapter Two, those that I feel are most pertinent to this thesis: *The Skriker*, *Cloud 9*, and, of course, *Top Girls*. Chapter Three is about my directorial process for the William and Mary production of *Top Girls* that was performed in October of 2016. I discuss my processes with the actors, how I conducted meetings and rehearsals, and how my relationship with my team differed from that of other teams I have worked on. Chapter Four is a discussion that intends to reach beyond the scope of Churchill's influence in the twentieth century out to the intersectional feminisms that we see and support today, with special attention brought to Chicana playwrights, Black playwrights, and trans* playwrights.

Feminism in theatre is incredibly important, not just to my peers and myself (liberal arts-educated, mostly majoring in theatre or English, artistic, queer), but to everyone who feels like they have no voice in a white, straight, mainstream, male-dominated society. Since its birth in the Suffragette movement, feminist theatre has attempted to give a platform to those who do not have one, and as intersectionality and diversity becomes more and more a part of standard feminism, that goal becomes more and more achievable.

Chapter One: A Little Background

When beginning a foray into feminist theatre, it is essential to have a solid grasp on the history of feminism and its existence in society today. Feminist movements, essentially, encouraged women to understand their oppressed position in, or complete exclusion from, important cultural and political elements of society (Aston, 5).

The first wave of feminism in the western world involved the suffragettes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The suffragettes fought for basic legal equality for women. These wealthy, mostly upper class, educated women campaigned for women's rights to vote and for other legal equalities, including the right to earn an equal wage for equal work. The second wave of feminism burst from the stifling oppression of the 1950's, and was seen often on college campuses – this was the time of bra-burning, where women (again, mostly white, well-off women) expressed their anger that while gender equality had finally been legislated, cultural expectations and social norms still kept women oppressed. Their arguments centered on the issues of equal pay, equal education and opportunity in the workplace, government-sponsored 24-hour nurseries, and free and openly available contraceptives and abortion, and their protests were very performative. For example, protestors of the Miss World contests in the 1960s and 1970s staged “counter spectacles by decorating their own bodies with flashing lights attached to clothing at their breasts and crotches” (Aston, 5), a kind of street protest that was a part of the “the body-centered critique of gender representation that, subsequently, was to dominate

feminist theatre, theory and practice in the 1980s" (Aston, 5). The third wave of feminism began in the nineties and has continued up until today. At this point in time, the feminist movement is grasping the understanding that different women experience oppression differently, depending on sexuality, race, disability, or any other difference that struggles in a world dominated by a generally white, straight patriarchy. It is a wave defined by an effort to include all women with the understanding that all women experience womanhood differently. With the advent of the internet as a popular platform for social commentary, we may be currently observing what some are calling the fourth wave of feminism, in which marginalized women of all different demographics and groups are able to speak their minds online (Munro, PSA).

Culture, society, and art influence feminism as much as feminism influences culture, society, and art. Theatre, and now film, are media in which women often struggle to find representation. According to statistics released by the BBC in 2015, a woman directed only one of the UK's top one hundred grossing films of that year. With women so underrepresented in the producing of such popular work, it is no surprise that women are underrepresented as characters on the big screen as well. "Women had less than a third of speaking parts in the most popular films last year" and only 12% of the top grossing films of 2014 featured female protagonists (BBC). The vast majority of films released in 2016 in Great Britain fail the Bechdel Test, which is based on the criteria of two named female characters in a movie at one point talking to each other about something other than a man, named after cartoonist Alison Bechdel who wrote a character who only went to see a movie if it passed this test (Dykes to Watch Out

For). While this test was invented entirely as a joke, it has still become a marker of feminism, or lack thereof, in film.

In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan explains that when watching a theatrical work, the woman in the audience must decide whether to empathize with the male protagonist at the risk of her own objectification, or to disengage with the story completely (2). Such a conflict for the critical feminist, who sees women in these productions relegated to such roles as “mother” or “girlfriend,” comes to understand that this kind of entertainment is simply not made for women. Such entertainment is not interested in women’s lives, nuances, and suffering.

The resolution of this conflict is feminist art. As Jill Dolan says in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, “Feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse. It is a critique of prevailing social conditions that formulate women’s position as outside of dominant male discourse” (3). Feminist art aims to critique that world of exclusion. A feminist theatrical work is one written by a woman, about women, for an audience of women. The characters represent the lives of women as they actually are, as opposed to the fantasy of what a patriarchal society thinks the lives of women are like.

Different areas of feminism all have their own different artistic representation. Jill Dolan defines multiple kinds of feminism in *Presence and Desire*. Marxist feminism focuses on the ways women are oppressed by capitalism as an economic class; particularly as much of the traditional work that women do (housework, child-rearing, etc.) is not compensated (71). Materialist feminism looks at the patriarchy and capitalism as a framework for studying the

oppression of women, with a focus on social rather than economic change (69) – such an approach looks at the complex combination of race, gender, ideology, and class to understand historical oppression, with the goal of transforming society (Aston, 69). Cultural feminists see patriarchal society as an unavoidable oppressor of women, and believe that the only solution is to separate completely from the male-dominated culture to form a new culture comprised of women (Dolan, 87). They see such activities as waging war, polluting the earth, allowing capitalism unlimited freedom at the expense of the poor, and objectifying women, as entirely and explicitly male (xv). Ecofeminism sees the destruction of the environment and exploitation of women as well as people of color as connected, because they are both a result of a male-dominated society (Warren and Erkal, xi). These are only a few groups of feminist practice and belief that, while similar in their resistance to patriarchal norms of society and push for the empowerment of women, are different in their beliefs about the way that the patriarchy influences society, and the best ways to go about subverting that influence.

Cultural feminists have become a much smaller, less influential group than Materialist feminists, which is due in part to their alignment with anti-pornography activism, which stems from an aversion to the objectification and negative and often violent treatment of women in pornography, but was viewed by many as anti-sex and puritanical (Dolan, xv). While Jill Dolan views cultural feminism quite critically, as overly strict and exclusive to women who adhere to their set-in-stone rules about women, femininity, and female relationships, saying that “I wasn’t alone in feeling the constraints of a feminism that saw itself as righteous and the only truth, or of performances that blindly assumed

everyone would feel only positively about their mothers, for example," (xx), she does understand the importance of cultural feminism at the peak of its influence, saying that it addressed "a historical need for affirmation and community against the harsh reality of a culture that made no room for women and their histories outside of patriarchal rule" (xx). Cultural feminism gave women the experience of being addressed as subjects, in all of their nuances, strengths, and flaws, and fully prized for who they were as women, in an important effort "to correct the damage inflicted by millennia of patriarchal rule" (Dolan, xxi). Dolan also notes that Judith Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble* destroyed cultural feminism's essentialist notions about gender. Butler theorizes that gender is a social construct that we recognize only through habits of culture, and her theories are still used in many performance studies' understandings of gender as "performative" as we see and do things that resist or comply with social gender norms (xxi).

There are feminist theatrical works that lend themselves to very different theories of feminism. For example, Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker*, which uses fairies to demonstrate the affects of patriarchal society on the Earth, can be defined as Ecofeminism. Lily and Josie live in a world in which their needs are ignored – Lily is a working single mother and Josie has just been released from hospital while dealing with a mental illness that resulted in the murder of her child. The Skriker, a fairy who represents the natural world, has also been abused by the patriarchal regime. It is damaged and angry, to a point where it generally cannot string a sentence together in a standard or logical way. The Skriker aligns itself with the sisters, which proves to be both a blessing and a curse, but it makes the girls' connection with the Skriker, and therefore their

similarities as victims of oppression by a force that is beyond them, clear. The Skriker says, "Us being together forever. We both know that" (Churchill) right after discussing with the women the impending natural disaster that will result from abuse of the planet:

Earthquakes. Volcanoes. Drought. Apocalyptic meteorological phenomena. The increase of sickness. It was always possible to think whatever your personal problem, there's always nature. ... But it's not available any more. Sorry. Nobody loves me and the sun's going to kill me. Spring will return and nothing will grow. Some people might feel concerned about that. But it makes me feel important. I'm going to be around when the world as we know it ends. ... this is going to be the big one (Skriker)

"The big one" being some sort of apocalyptic environmental disaster, but as the Skriker discusses the effects of environmental abuse, which Josie and Lily are going to suffer for even though it is a product of a situation beyond their control, such events also reflect on the social situation of Josie and Lily, who are young, parentless, uneducated single mothers who are doing the best they can, but are also a product of a situation beyond their control.

Susan Glaspell's one-act, *Trifles* looks at a murder mystery through a Materialist Feminist lens, as a pair of women, "used to worrying about trifles" (Glaspell) solve the mystery with their understanding of the belongings of the

people who lived in the house, and their understanding of what a person's trifles say about them. In the women's investigation of the kitchen, which the sheriff and his group have already passed over, they see signs of Minnie's misery in her time as a married woman, see that her husband killed her pet canary, and decide to hide the evidence that Minnie probably committed the murder. The men busy "snooping around and criticizing" (Glaspell), don't see the importance of the small household items that reveal the murderer.

There is a historical tradition of women making feminist theatre to express themselves and their frustrations living in a patriarchal society, as well as to promulgate political messages for theatergoers. The Suffragette plays are an example of such political action through theatre. Suffragettes wrote dramatic, short works about the way women suffer in a nation where they have no political or economic power, as well as witty, comedic shorts that seek to engage an unwilling audience and convince them of the importance of franchising women. For example, in Christopher St. John's and Cecily Hamilton's *How the Vote Was Won*, our protagonist is Horace, a man who does not believe that women should be enfranchised, citing the argument that women should depend on their close male relatives to provide for them. Over the course of the short play, five financially independent distant female relatives show up on his doorstep, saying that as he is their closest male relative, he should be providing for them: "Now I am going to give up my work, until my work is recognized. Either my proper place is the home – the home provided for me by some dear father, brother, husband, cousin or uncle – or I am a self-supporting member of the State who ought not to be shut out from the rights of citizenship" (St. John). Predictably,

Horace by the end of the play has become the loudest and most enthusiastic member of the Suffragette Movement.

By the 1960's, devised theatre, a form of improvisatory theatre that gave performers the freedom to work in less constricted ways, allowed feminists to express their frustrations with patriarchal oppression in a new way. Devising theatre meant that women did not have to work with a script produced by a patriarchal culture – they could create theatre “their way” (Aston, 15). Elaine Aston summarizes the appeal of devised theatre for feminist groups in her book, *Feminist Theatre Practice: A Handbook*:

As a process, this allows women the opportunity to practice theatre collaboratively and democratically. Many of the plays created by feminist companies in the late 1970s, for example, were devised collaboratively, rather than scripted by a playwright. Productions by the Women's Theatre Group between 1974 and 1978, for instance, were all devised by the company (15)

Devising theatre based on feminist issues allowed women to focus on what they wanted to say, rather than the style in which they said it (Aston, 15). Feminist performers also found other unique ways to make theatre their own. For example, Karen Finley is a performance artist whose performances in mixed clubs involved nudity, smearing herself with chocolate and egg yolks, and

yelling incendiary stories about male sexual violence, with a goal of disrupting the male gaze completely (Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, xvii).

Feminist theatre artists of this era began to form their own theatre companies, a space for women to practice complete control of the “organization, content, and style of their theatre work” (Aston, 6). Such organizations wanted to stay away from traditional mainstream representations of women as belonging to men, and instead represented women as subjects worthy of their own stories. They brought women’s problems and stories to the center in order to allow women to be “seen” as themselves instead of a “representation of a masculinist imagination” (Aston, 6). Women, who in theatre had traditionally been represented as the mother, wife, or girlfriend of the important male characters, wanted to see representation of themselves as the main characters in their own stories.

For example, the audience that grew around the WOW Café represented a subculture looking for representation in comedy and that wanted to “shrug off the yoke of feminist political correctness” as these materialist feminists sought fun and humor in a critique of both the dominant culture and the dominant (cultural) feminism of the time (Dolan, xix). These companies were democracies that were organized non-hierarchically, and developed styles that facilitated collective collaboration rather than bourgeois individualism (Aston, 6).

The focus of this thesis involves the wave of feminist theatre that arose in the United Kingdom in the 1980’s. The 1980’s marks a time where, particularly in Great Britain, new academic frameworks and methodologies, including the theory of semiotics, or the study of signs, was applied to feminist theatre, and the field of theatre was connected to other disciplines, such as sociology and

psycholinguistics (Aston, 4). Theorizing gender became a new interest of the theatrical world. Such scholastic approaches to feminist theatre look at the construction of “woman” as a sign, an approach that uses feminism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics to understand how women are represented in a cultural context (Aston, 5). Such an explosion of critical theory during this time period had an exciting impact on how both practical and theoretical feminist theatre practitioners approached the study of theatre. The exchange of cultural ideas between theatre theory and theatre practice through workshops, lectures, and performances, led to a new, more theoretical or pedagogical interest in theatre performance and playwriting (3-4). This academic interest in theatre as a sociological and psychological study provided a groundwork for new and unique feminist theatre. Such groups as the Women’s Theatre Program (WTP) in the United States provided a platform for the academic pursuit of feminist theatre study and performance (Aston, 5). Such playwrights who wrote in this style at this time, a style which involved incorporating ideas of feminist theory into their work, often through Brechtian alienation, revisionist history, and an attention to class oppression in addition to gender oppression, include Charlotte Keatley, the writer of *My Mother Said I Never Should*, Pam Gems, of *Queen Christina*, and, the writer of *Top Girls* and one of the main subjects of this thesis, Caryl Churchill. These women playwrights focused entirely on women’s problems and the state of being a woman in the world, both today and in the past. Many of these works involve a “feminist re-envisioning of male versions of history” (Aston, 30), which is based on the idea that the voices of women throughout history have been erased by the patriarchy. Such an approach to history critiques the tradition of the Western classical stage, in which men control

representations of women, in favor of a tradition in which the female performer constructs the male as a sign – a historical interest therefore, that takes more interest in the Romantic style of women in “britches roles” than Shakespearian men playing women (Aston, 30). Such revisionist playwrights work to give voice to important historical figures whose voices have not been heard because of their gender.

Feminist theatre theory rejects the concept of a theatre tradition in which the voices of women are excluded or “lost.” Much feminist theatre scholarship takes an interest in eras when women did not exist on stage at all, their bodies portrayed by male actors miming the “feminine,” resulting in many feminist theatre practitioners taking a specific interest in the re-appropriation of their own bodies for the stage. Such an interest in the female body supports the cultural feminist address of oppression through a focus on experiences specific to the female body, such as birth and menstruation, as a way of reclaiming women’s bodies from patriarchal victimization (Aston, 9). Says Elaine Aston, “In the early 1980s, Britain’s longest-running feminist theatre company, the Women’s Theatre Group, toured a number of plays which dramatized a feminist re-envisioning of male versions of history” (30). One of these works was Pam Gems’ *Queen Christina*, an exploration of the life of the woman raised as a boy to be the King of Sweden, who as an adult abdicated the throne. While we may never know the real thoughts and motivations of this woman, it is important that she be given some sort of voice, an acknowledgement that she was an important person who made important historical decisions, even though her gender excluded her from the scholarly attention and exploration she deserved in a world of patriarchal history.

Feminist writing is marked not only by a focus on women, but also by its resistance to realism as a form of writing. Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* says, "Realism's resolutely domestic locales, with its boxed sets; its middle class, bourgeois proprieties; its Aristotelian plotlines, which encouraged psychological identification against women's own good; and its rising action, crisis, and denouements, was bound to marginalize women" (xiv). Because of this resistance, much feminist theatre makes use of nonlinear timelines, dream sequences, and mythology and fairy tales to communicate. In that vein, many feminists objected to the objectification of women that lent itself to the realist tradition through character based Method acting. Says Elaine Aston, "The character roles made available for women to 'get into' in this 'method' invites the actress to identify with the oppression of the female character to whom she has been assigned" (7).

In contrast, Brechtian acting, in which the actor maintains their own personhood while playing a character onstage, allowed feminist actors to play a variety of roles while playing the awareness of the problematic views, stereotypes, or writing of this character. For example, Split Britches and Bloodlips in 1991 put on a production of *Belle Reprieve*, a comedic, cabaret-like characters in which the queering of the genders and sexualities of the characters was a backbone of the story. Peggy Shaw, while playing the part of Stanley, did not stop being a butch lesbian while playing the part of a straight male, and this understanding informed her performance. Shaw and Bette Bourne, as Stanley and Blanche, were in the unique position of making profound comments about gender and gender roles simply by the way they existed onstage. They are, as Stanley says, "...the extremes, the stereotypes. We are as far as we can go" (Case,

180). One of the darkest and most poignant moments in the play is when Stanley informs Blanche, "If you want to play a woman, the woman in this play gets raped and goes crazy in the end," and she responds, "I don't want to get raped and go crazy. I just wanted to wear a nice frock" (Harvie and Weaver, 104).

By the 1970s Brechtian methods of playwriting and play production were widely adopted by feminist groups, which used an anti-illusionist aesthetic to challenge the ideology of the classical, male-dominated realist tradition (Aston, 69). Such a method involved a focus on social problems and the use of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or A-effect and the *gestus* to force audiences to think objectively and critically about the events transpiring onstage. Brechtian-based alienation was a method of cultural distancing to interrupt the gaze in feminist productions. Gendered relations were critically examined through the rejection of realist conventions in staging and performance, casting women against their conventional stereotypes, and using puppets and dolls to create a *Gestus*.

One of the most alienating techniques in this kind of feminist performance was the "construction of the female body as a site of 'looking-at-being-looked-at-ness' in performance, through playing with the vestimentary codes of gendered costume in relation to the body" (Aston, 90). In other words, how women were dressed, whether in an over-the-top feminine way that overemphasized the treatment of women as beautiful objects of decoration, or cross-dressed in traditionally male clothing to make points about the gendering of bodies and clothes, was a key to distancing an audience to force them to think about gendered clothing and gendered behavior in a different way. The Brechtian style of theatre practice and playwriting is rooted in socialist and Marxist politics, which in the 1980s provided British materialist-feminists a political and aesthetic

framework to explore gender (69). The 1980s in Britain was a time where feminist playwrights wrote not only about the oppression that women faced from men, but the oppression that women of different socioeconomic classes faced from everyone. The harsh lives of working-class women in the 1980s were demonstrated in the work of Andrea Denbar, a teenage dramatist who wrote her first play, *The Arbor*, when she was fifteen. She wrote two other plays before her death that “provided a raw, harsh look at the lives of young, northern women” (73), and the Royal Court company, which produced all of her work as well as Caryl Churchill’s, termed her style the “New Brutalism.” Elaine Aston says of Denbar’s work, “While her plays foreground the oppression of working-class men and women, the oppression of women is shown to be the greater as the working class men in their lives are also their (often violent) oppressors” (73).

Of these particular feminist playwrights, British women writing in this particular style around the 1980s, the one that I am focusing on for this project is Caryl Churchill. Churchill used the “unhappy marriage” (Aston, 69) of Marxism and feminism to critique not only class relations between men and women, but also intra-sexual class oppression (72), exacerbated by Thatcherite politics and the perpetuating myth of the “Superwoman,” who transcended class boundaries with her material success in the workplace and in the home, a critique of which we can see clearly in her play *Top Girls*, where “top girl” Marlene has achieved success at the expense of the oppression of her working-class sister Joyce, who is raising Marlene’s daughter (72).

Immensely successful as a British socialist playwright, Caryl Churchill’s work is produced all over the world, including, in the fall of last year, Williamsburg, VA. Elaine Aston believes “that a feminist theatre practice can

help women to 'see" their lives politically: to raise awareness of oppression and to encourage women's creativity (2), and I believe that in performing such feminist work at my own school, using feminist practices in rehearsal and performance, an important message will be sent about the value of women's voices and stories in our own community.

Chapter Two: Caryl Churchill

Caryl Churchill is not a figment of literary or theatrical history, but is in fact a living artist still producing incredible work. However, the work discussed here comes primarily from a few decades prior to the present, partially because those are the works that contribute to a perspective of feminist playwriting and production at the end of the twentieth century, and also because this thesis is primarily centered around William and Mary's recent production of *Top Girls*, which was published in 1982. Three of Churchill's most famous works deal with different aspects of the struggles of women in a society that is not built for them: *Cloud 9* (1979), *Top Girls* (1982), and *The Skriker* (1994). This chapter hopes to examine these plays to find themes and styles particular to Caryl Churchill, who in 1982 was the only playwright to have two plays running simultaneously in New York (Keyssar, 198).

The 1980's were an interesting political time in the United Kingdom and the United States. Thatcherism (touting policies very similar to those of Ronald Reagan across the pond) with its emphasis on the power of the free market, taking such actions as cutting social programs and forcing the unions out of trade deals, and a reactionary hyper-capitalist sentiment in response to communism was creating a world in which fierce individualism, emphasis on financial success, and Social Darwinism had become societal norms (Dolan, xxvi).

How did women, a group far less financially successful than their male counterparts, a group characterized after the 1950's as sweet and submissive

housewives valued most for their ability to birth and rear children, function as independent individuals in this kind of world? A 1988 study of class structures in the United States shows that women based their social class on that of their husbands': "Since nearly all conceptions of class take into account the individual's position in the workplace as a primary consideration, non-employed married women could be defined as outside the class structure, or more often, as linked to it indirectly through their husbands' employment" (Davis and Robinson, 104). This study acknowledged that over the course of the 1980s, the lives of American women and men tended more toward individualism than they had in earlier decades (Davis and Robinson, 110), as a reaction to communism and to an increase in personal wealth that occurred during the economic boom of this era.

Such a tendency was a positive change for many women who at this time had greater access to the workplace than before, but these women had to fight both the expectation that they keep their sphere of influence in the home, and the assumption that women in the workplace were weak, subservient, and less valuable employees. The 1978 book *Woman's Dress for Success*, by John T. Malloy, was marketed for women in the workplace to help them alter the way they dressed in the hopes that by changing their appearance they would gain respect and be taken seriously by their male bosses and coworkers. One of the top customer reviews for this book states, "I was one of the first women Merrill Lynch hired as a stockbroker. This was our Bible. It is hysterical and historical. I sent it as a gift to a young assistant stockbroker to show her how far we've come and how far we haven't" (amazon.com).

Women at home had to face their own financial dependence and lack of monetary value while women in the workplace had to walk the line between femininity and masculinity as they sacrificed personal relationships and their own femininity to earn the respect and (not always) equal treatment with their male coworkers. To quote Elaine Aston in her book *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*:

Thatcherite politics promoted the image of the high-flying female achiever who was capable of transcending class boundaries and of attaining material success at home and in the workplace. The reality was somewhat different. Very few women were in a position to gain access to paid positions of power which would enable them to combine work and family life (72)

Margaret Thatcher did not advocate for women, in spite of her own position of power. The three Churchill plays under consideration deal in different ways with the unique facets of the modern world with which modern women struggle.

The Skriker is above all a tale of environmentalism and how the patriarchal oppression of the planet is similarly related to patriarchal oppression of marginalized groups. "Rather than offering personal choice and change, Churchill issues a sharp warning about changes already in progress that endanger the future" (Kritzer, 112). Lily is pregnant, about to be a single mother in a harsh and cold world. Her sister Josie has just been released from a mental

institution after having a breakdown and killing her own baby. The sisters have attracted the attention of the Skriker, a fairy, “ancient and damaged” (Churchill), who follows them about their lives, taking different forms and cursing them and blessing them in different ways, “in pursuit of Lily’s unborn child and her very soul and substance” (Remshardt, 121). The story plays out as a sort of Rumpelstiltskin-tale, of which the Skriker tells a twisted version at the beginning of the play, pulling from universal themes found in folklore and mythology (Kritzer, 112), but the ending denies the simply solved happy ending of the traditional fairy tale (Remshardt, 121). The Skriker is a being taken from Irish and northern English myth, a creature whose name is an archaic version of the word “screamer” (Kritzer, 113), and is a kind of banshee that wails to announce an imminent death, providing a sense of fatality or unavoidable consequence to the story. The Skriker also presents broader mythical overtones, such as Persephone and the Furies of ancient Greek myth, as well as Anansi, the trickster god of West African folklore (112).

The women are terrified of the Skriker, who has the power to make gold coins or frogs come out of their mouths and can take them to the fairy world where hundreds of years or no time at all can pass in a day. Despite their fear, as the world faces environmental catastrophe, or, as the Skriker calls it, “apocalyptic meteorological phenomena” (Churchill), they are inherently joined with the Skriker, their fates intertwined. Such a connection is an important tenet of eco-feminism, which draws parallels between male abuse of the environment and male abuse of women, and concludes that the safety and rights of women are inextricably linked to the safety and rights of the earth. When the Skriker takes the form of an abused little girl who explains, “My dad did things to me.... My

boyfriend's going to kill me" (Churchill), it is also explaining its own predicament as a being of the natural world that has also been abused.

The Skriker is a fairy, connected to the earth in a supernatural and intimate way, and, as the earth is being damaged and destroyed, so is the Skriker. It is injured, often delirious, and absolutely bitter at the treatment it has received, punishing people, seemingly almost arbitrarily and replying with such lines as, "Serve her right as raining cats and dogshit" (Churchill). Such a sentence structure shows the audience how truly damaged the Skriker is – a person who cannot continue a sentence in a logical way but leaps from association to association instead of communicating a solid idea, although there are three separate ideas in that sentence. There are also other folkloric creatures that interact and tell stories in the background of the play but do not interact with the three main characters. Such figures bring attention to the disturbing dangers that exist in the familiar, everyday world, "while the broader mythic resonances of these figures suggest universal and irreversible changes in the natural world" (Kritzer, 113). Amelia Howe Kritzer, in her review of *The Skriker*, suggests that these other fairies, "Dominating the stage, but unacknowledged by the speaking characters, they represent the everyday tumult of creatures and processes in the natural world" (115). Rivers, horses, and trees are just a few of the natural things represented by these characters onstage. These creatures, because of their heavy associations with nature, show us through their cruelty to the humans around them and in their own desperation, the terrifying imbalances in the natural world.

None of the characters except for the Skriker, Josie, and Lily speak. The existence of these speaking characters in an overwhelmingly visually and

musically based world shows us the way they try to function in an “incomprehensible world of sound and movement that does not recognize or defer to them” (Kritzer, 113), an idea that is very disturbing to the world of humans, which has based itself on its ability to understand and control nature. The human and fairy characters that interact with each other in this play combine to create a whirlwind of events and ideas that overwhelms the two girls, emphasizing their vulnerability and smallness in relation to the largeness of both the human world and the natural world, and their inability to appropriately understand or adapt to important and dangerous aspects of the world in which they live.

The use of fairies and the fairy Underworld harkens back to the Victorian imagination, when fairies symbolized the culture’s preoccupation with the high infant mortality of the time and with sexual anxiety, as fairies are notorious in stories for hurting children and seducing young girls (Remshardt, 122), but Rolf Erik Remshardt, in his 1995 review of a production of *The Skriker*, explains that “Churchill’s piece is largely a play about childhood and childhaving today, within a social order that abandons women such as Josie and Lily (the girls live in a world apparently without parents, without much of anything besides their bruised souls” (122). The isolation and abandonment of young mothers at vulnerable points in their lives is an important aspect of this work, highlighting the abandonment of these women in their time of need and connecting to the damage done to the fairy world, which is intricately connected with nature. The Underworld of the fairies parallels the Earth on which Josie and Lily live, a desolate place, with a superficial sense of glamor (in the Underworld the glamor is magic, in the human world the glamor is technology) that is covering up the

damage at its core. However, the glamor is irresistible, an idea that helps to sum up one of the principal problems of modern life: “humans sell themselves and harm others in order to possess, display, and consume things that have no intrinsic value, but only seem desirable because of their aura of glamor” (Kritzer, 118). In other words, the material, earthly things that we want most in the world cause us to damage others, and ourselves, but, in the end, the destruction only leads to a reward that is just not worth the cost.

The character of the Skriker disguises itself as many different people throughout the play. At one point, it is a little girl who strikes Josie blind and at another it is an old woman in a bar who has a conversation with Lily. It is interesting to see the different kinds of effects that the Skriker has on the two sisters whom it follows and curses depending on the age, gender, and economic situation of the disguise the Skriker is wearing. We as an audience learn to identify the Skriker by the actor as opposed to the different characters that the Skriker is playing.

In the end, while Josie is transported to the fairy land and, although thinking she is there for years, comes back in the very moment that she left, Lily takes the same chance but is the victim of a cruel game, instead returning to the real world a hundred years later, meeting her granddaughter who is now an old woman. Lily’s acquiescence to the Skriker’s demands on her love and attention do nothing to save her; she is tricked and can only return as a ghost to meet her granddaughter’s granddaughter and to face “the wordless rage of the deformed girl” (Remshardt, 121). The helplessness of trying to save anyone, of trying to “win” in a world where you do not know the rules, becomes clear in this final scene when we understand the cruel trick that has been played on Lily, who, in

her selfless attempt to save her sister and daughter from the Skriker, is the one left to face the anger of future generations and then die herself. Lily is only trying to help others, and has no intention of abandoning her baby, but that is the consequence of her choice. Such arbitrary punishment without much attention paid to cause and effect shows us that what happens to us is a result of much more than our individual actions, and that we as individuals suffer for the bad choices of large groups of people. For example, the pollution of the earth results in individual suffering for people affected by the consequences. In this play, Churchill uses the fairy tale in a modern setting to address women facing mental illness and the environmental crisis.

Cloud 9, special in and of itself as “one of the longest running plays by a woman ever presented in New York” (Keyssar, 198), is a deconstruction of colonialism, and an exploration of how patriarchal colonialism affected not only indigenous peoples, but also the women living as a part of British society at the time, who were themselves “colonized” by their men. Even the method of casting this play varied from tradition, as actors were cast based not only on professional skill and appropriateness for the role, but “on the basis of interviews in which they were asked to discuss their own sexual identities” (Keyssar, 212). According to Janelle Reinelt in her article *Caryl Churchill and the politics of style*, the idea of juxtaposing 1972 with the present came from workshops with the actors, who “felt they had inherited Victorian traditions and ways of thinking about sexuality which they struggled to overcome or transform” (182). From these workshops came a script that “asserts the inseparability of class and sexual oppression and calls into question the rigidity of our perceptions of human beings as men and women” (Keyssar, 213). The play draws parallels between

Victorian society's vehement condemnation of any kind of non-normative sexual act or gender performance and modern society of 1972, in which people still affected by such social condemnation decide to explore and experiment. Through the family of *Cloud 9*, which somehow manages to exist in the mid-nineteenth century and then somehow only twenty-five years later but also in the mid-twentieth Churchill shows us how the past remains a presence in our lives (Reinelt, 183).

The first act looks at a Victorian colonist family in Africa, exploring the sexual politics of the parents, children, and their friends and servants amid the growing fear of a native attack. The second act transports that family to London one hundred years later, although only twenty-five years have passed for the characters, observing how those characters interact when the strict rules of Victorian society and the strict rules of traditional comedy are loosened.

The family of Act One is controlled by Clive, the white patriarch, who has built up the rest of the family to be everything he wants them to be. However, as play moves forward, Clive is the only one in the family who acts predictably. Betty, the "dutiful" wife, throws herself at her husband's friend Harry Bagley, Ellen, the governess, reveals that her devotion to Betty is based on her romantic attraction to her, and Harry Bagley, the honorable English explorer, has sex both with Clive's African servant and with Clive's young son Edward. Act One ends with a wedding, in traditional comic form, but "the bride and groom are Harry, the gay family friend, and Ellen, the lesbian governess" (213).

Churchill makes a point of having characters played by actors of a different gender than the character. For example, in Act One, Betty is played by a man and her son Edward is played by a woman. The use of gender-bending

allows the audience to see characters in new ways – for example, for a male actor to play Clive’s wife Betty shows us that as an upper-class woman raised in Victorian society Betty has no identity of her own, but is simply a reflection of her husband. It also changes how the audience looks at sexual relationships between characters and forces us to think about our own reactions to them. For example, the affair between Betty and Harry Bagley, while between a man and a woman character, shows the audience two male actors in a romantic relationship onstage, so while the storyline is about a heterosexual relationship, the audience is watching two men kiss. On the other hand, strange romance between Edward and Harry Bagley, while between a boy and a man, is from another, outside perspective, between a man and a woman. Such a tactic is used by Churchill “to destabilize the normal, to make fun of, but also to critique, the disciplinary methods family and culture use to require compulsory heterosexuality and gender normativity” (Reinelt, 183), and keeps the audience from settling comfortably into their traditional notions of gendered romance, instead forcing the audience to be constantly thinking about the meaning of gender and sexuality. It is important to mention that actors cast opposite their gender identities were meant to play the roles accurately and truthfully, and not as a caricature. “At one point during rehearsals, Caryl recalls, she had ‘forgotten’ that the actor playing Betty was a man, despite the fact that he was dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt and sporting a full beard” (Keyssar, 213).

Act Two, twenty-five years later for the family and one hundred years later in history, shows us Betty, now middle-aged and in the process of divorcing Clive, Victoria, who is married and a mother herself, and Edward, who lives with his male friend Gerry and works as a gardener. By following the sexual

liberation and experimentation of this family, Churchill shows us that while other aspects of social life have altered since Victorian times, but family life has remained very much the same. While Victoria can live with and share a bed with her lover Lin, her brother Edward, and her child and Lin's child, "parent-children relationships, domestic roles, attitudes towards work, and assertions of power remain remarkably similar to those of Victorian England" (Helene Keyssar).

In this play, Churchill follows the Brechtian method of *Verfremdungseffekt*, alienation or denaturalization – that is, taking a normal, taken-for-granted thing, and making it abnormal to the audience. We see, for example, scenes of serious drama offset by theatrical breaks, where the cast sings and dances, to prevent the audience from getting comfortable focusing only on the plot and characters. Another example is that, a doll plays the baby daughter in Act One. The audience is able to see that the "natural" silence and passivity that was expected and normal in a young girl of this era is in fact an unnatural expectation. *Cloud 9* shows us that women as a colonized group have been made into reflections of their oppressors, and as they liberate themselves need to time to experiment and to discover what it is to be a woman in the modern world. We see here a great example of the style of Caryl Churchill's work, which placing great importance in the narrative or sequence of plot to create drama, instead focusing on the vulnerability and importance of individual characters. As Helene Keyssar says, "We learn from being spectators to *Cloud 9* that it is what we do, not how we appear, that best identifies us as men and women, and we learn that we can accept men and women as human beings much more easily than we might have suspected" (214).

Of these three plays, which help to summarize Churchill's approaches to feminism and playwriting in and around the 1980's, *Top Girls* is perhaps the most straightforward, in spite of its nonlinear timeframe as it addresses the complexities of women's lives. *Top Girls* asks still-relevant questions about the possibility of happiness for women in a world where career and financial success are considered the keys to a well-lived life but women are still expected to look after their families and tend to domestic matters. This socialist feminist drama also contrasts the oppression of the working-class woman to that of her middle and upper class counterparts. Women in poorer, northern communities had benefitted much less from the feminist movement, and had limited access to the workplace, suffering "increasing hardship as the wives of unemployed working-class men, and the mothers of children with jobless futures" (Aston, 73).

Is it possible for women to "have it all?" As Churchill explores the life of Marlene, a successful businesswoman who at the age of seventeen abandoned her infant daughter with her married sister in order to find career success, she exposes a society that is not set up for women to be fulfilled or happy. Churchill explores here the concept that in order to preserve modern patriarchal society, as we know it, both men and women have to participate in the oppression of women (Burk, 67). She demonstrates how, as Juli Thompson Burk puts it, "Success is often oppression in disguise" (67). Marlene has become very successful in the business world in London, at the expense of her sister, Joyce, who is stuck in their hometown raising Marlene's daughter.

The first scene of the play is a dream sequence in which Marlene, after having received a promotion in the real world, sits down at a dinner party with five famous historical or fictional women: Lady Nijo, a historical Japanese royal

concubine and later Buddhist nun who traveled Japan, Isabella Byrd, a Victorian era explorer who was the first white woman to meet the Emperor of Morocco, Pope Joan, the mythical female Pope whose sex was discovered after accidentally becoming pregnant and giving birth during a street procession, Dull Gret, a painted character by Breughel who led an army of women to storm hell, and Patient Griselda, late to the party, Chaucer's "perfect woman," who did everything her husband told her even to the point of sacrificing her children. Caryl Churchill said that "for years...she has been haunted by an odd collection of dead women drawn from history, paintings, and literature" (Keyssar, 214), and finally in *Top Girls* all of them are invited to dinner. All of these women are famous, incredible, and miserable, many their lives still scarred and controlled by men and the male-dominated society in which they live. Also, the way they completely ignore the waitress, who silently drifts in and out of the scene, highlights the classism that shines through the cracks in the female utopia of Marlene's imaginary restaurant, in which the conversation frames the different beliefs and lifestyles of Marlene and her sister Joyce.

In later scenes, we see Marlene in the workplace, dominant over both the men and the women, who cannot be her friends in the competitive atmosphere of the Top girls Employment Agency. We also meet Angie, Marlene's daughter, who does not possess her mother's drive or intelligence, and instead is marked for failure in an individualist, Thatcherite world, and Marlene's sister Joyce, who has been unable to transcend the class boundaries and is raising Angie as her own. In the final scene, which takes place a year before the rest of the events in the play, the audience sees clearly the tension and resentment in Angie and Marlene's relationship, the way Joyce envies Marlene's success and believes it to

be at her own expense, and the way Marlene looks down on Joyce and her life, yet also envies her position as Angie's mother and her place in the family. Some critics have denounced the play as much too confusing for an audience, not only in its nonlinear timeline and strange dream sequence, but also for its lack of a "transcendent female figure" (Keyssar, 215). Marlene is a character who commands respect, and while one cannot condemn her, it is also difficult to like her. Churchill makes clear that Marlene is only successful in the terms of a capitalist society, and her power is based in her acceptance of capitalist and patriarchal structures, without attempting to glorify her or condemn her. We see that Marlene has no friends or positive personal relationships – everyone who comes to her party celebrating her promotion is dead. Juli Thompson Burk explains that in order to achieve success in a capitalist and patriarchal society, one must reject the "female-inhabited world of daily life" (71), and that "Associations between rational economic men can only occur through the exchange of things, objects, and not through personal relationships" (71). Therefore, Marlene is lonely, even though she has consciously rejected lifestyles associated with women and any kind of relationships with women.

Some also argue that the play is much too pessimistic, ending with the cry, "Frightening" (Churchill) from a girl who, as Keyssar describes her, "is doomed to a miserable life in which she can achieve nothing" (215). However, an honest and blunt look at a real situation of many women in the world is not something that can be ignored, and Caryl Churchill, who says herself that she has at times been "accused of being both too optimistic and too pessimistic," continues to represent them.

Caryl Churchill has achieved the status of a great playwright and feminist, having written over thirty-five plays for theatre, radio, and television, all of which challenge conventional assumptions about gender roles. (Keyssar, 199).

She is responsible for a lot of moving and relevant work. However, Caryl Churchill is not the only great feminist playwright. Other fantastic female playwrights writing before and after the turn of the century include Pam Gems, another British playwright who wrote revisionist historical works of underrepresented women in history, such as *Queen Christina*, Marsha Norman, who challenged the male-dominated canon with her look at love and death in women's spaces in *Night, Mother*, Adrienne Kennedy, an African American playwright who disregarded typical playwriting structures to explore concepts of whiteness and blackness in the United States in her work *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, and countless other writers of brilliant, articulate, and heartbreaking work. However, the theatre has always been a particularly male-centric place. Male playwrights are much more likely to have their work produced and are also more likely to win awards for their work. In addition to the field of playwriting, men also dominate the production and direction of theatre, including feminist theatre written by women. Putting questions of whether it is possible for a man to direct a feminist work, or correctly direct work written for and about women and women's lives, the fact that men have such artistic opportunities and women so much more often find that they do not is a huge problem for the future of the theatre world.

Chapter Three: An Adventure in Practical Application

With the previous research as a basis for my project, I decided to do a senior directorial through William and Mary Theatre Second Season. Going into this project, there was a certain style with which I wanted to lead. Inspired by the rise of women's theatre collectives in the 1970s and 1980s, and the technique of the "feminist director," I felt that the ability to lead in this way – a way in which collaboration and teamwork are valued more than the hierarchical chain of command – would produce a genuine and quality performance.

I chose Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* as the production I was to direct. It was not a difficult choice. As a woman looking to have both a successful career and a successful personal life, I found the messages of *Top Girls* to be profound and relevant to my own interests. *Top Girls* takes a close look at women in the workforce, acknowledging that in order for a woman to have a successful career, she must give up the "feminine" desire for a family or successful domestic life – although a glimpse into the life of the protagonist's sister, a housekeeper and the caretaker for her aged mother and teenage daughter, shows that a traditionally feminine life is not especially fulfilling either. Thirty years later, this message, sadly, carries relevance for many women pursuing careers. Also, I wanted an opportunity to cast women in the William and Mary Theatre Department. Due to the male-heavy casting of the plays we tend to produce in this department, a lot of incredible women actors have put in an incredible effort of work in their acting, and continue to be passed over in casting simply because there are not parts for them. As my career in the department at the College of William and

Mary has progressed, I have found this problem to be increasingly frustrating as talented and hardworking women have failed to be cast again and again in spite of their skill and ability level. I was excited for an opportunity to give these women the chance to be seen.

Beginning production for this play, I wanted the most qualified production team I could find. Through some unique twist of fate, everyone who volunteered to design for this show was a woman. It was not a qualification, definitely was not something I was looking for in particular, but right now in this department most of our top designers happen to be women. The universe seemed to be pushing for me to write this thesis about women in theatre production.

As a production team, our working methods were distinctly different from male-dominated teams I have worked on in the past. Last year, I worked as the dramaturge for W&M's production of *The Oresteia*, a team composed of mostly men, and have acted and worked as a props master and props assistant for many other male-dominated productions. What I experienced as a part of the *Top Girls* team was something completely different.

In my past experience of production teams, production meetings are very structured events. Each designer takes turns talking around the table, and while it is that person's turn, no one else can speak, to ask a question or explain or confirm something that is tangentially related unless the speaker specifically gives them the metaphorical talking stick. The sense of "professionalism" that hangs over the group prevents any kind of personal conversation or explanation of shortcomings in the designers' work. If they have failed to produce something by the deadline, they have failed, no questions asked. The thing that struck me

most in these more traditional meetings was the sense of competition that pervaded the entire situation. Designers are competing for stage space, for their particular colors and concepts, for their workers to be given easier or more interesting jobs. Disagreements could get tense, passive-aggressive, and sometimes downright disrespectful. As a student observing these meetings, I was intimidated. As a director heading my own production meetings, I worried that we would have similar problems.

My team as a group was completely different from what I had become accustomed to in other production settings. For one thing, our meeting was never formally structured. We would often begin with whoever wanted to go first, and then if someone had a question, comment, or concern for that designer, we would switch focus to that person. Conversation was often layered and tangential; while we sometimes got off topic, deference to our stage manager, Barclay Sparrow, kept things organized and focused. We did not have a specific structure for our meetings, but instead went with the natural flow of conversation to get our specific questions and problems answered. Often, personal stories would become part of the flow of the conversation, and we would take a moment to discuss a class, a professor, or something interesting that happened last Saturday, before getting back on topic. To an outside observer, this style of meeting would probably seem disorganized and confusing; however, since we came in with our own lists and notes, and took care to listen and note things that were important and relevant to our particular field of design, this system was relaxed, informal, and much more fun. There was a deep sense of respect for everyone at the table. To my great relief, the sense of competition that I often sensed in other teams was not present here, even with

the incredibly tight budget with which we were working. We were all invested in working as a team, and there was a sense of personal involvement in everyone's work and wellbeing. As an example, my sound designer had never worked in the Studio Theater before, and during tech rehearsals had a lot of problems with the speakers. Instead of annoyance, or even apathy, the response of the rest of my designers was that of helpful concern. Together, we all figured out the speakers, and continued to work with them together as they continued to misbehave.

Helene Keyssar in *The Massachusetts Review* writes about the conflicting notion of Caryl Churchill being both a feminist playwright and a "leading" or "major" playwright, saying that such terminology is connected with traditional theatre criticism, dominated by men, which accepts a "hierarchical estimation of value" (199). She says, "Feminist theatre was born in part as a rejection of the continuing tendency in theater to name and elevate some artists – almost always men – to positions of leadership while minimizing the important contributions of others, of women in particular" (199). This kind of traditional, male-dominated thinking about the person in charge being the one who makes the important decisions and takes all the credit is exactly what I was hoping to avoid in my directorial process. Even with my title as Director and control of the funding, I believe that the attitude with which I approached the work kept the process collaborative.

Such a method of work reminds me of the rich history of women's theatre collectives that became popular in the 1980s. For example, the WOW Café Theatre, which describes itself on its website as "The Oldest Collectively-Run Performance Space for Women And/Or Trans Artists In the Known Universe"

(wowcafe.org). The WOW Café Theatre makes a point of having no artistic director or centralized control over the works that are produced in the theatre, emphasizing the freedom that the artists have to “produce anything they desire” (wowcafe.org). While this project did have a center of control (me), the emphasis on group work and allowing artists to experiment is quite similar to these collectives. An even more vivid example of women’s collective theatre (albeit on a much more extreme front) was the Sistern Theater Collective in Jamaica, which began in 1977 when thirteen women came together to do a play about “How we suffer as women and how men treat us bad” (Ferner, 1). At a time and place where “the burden of childcare, unemployment, inadequate social service, inflation, and poor housing falls largely on the shoulders of women,” there was a need for an outlet that could adequately examine the links between class and gender in the oppression and exploitation of working class Jamaican women (Ferner, 1). The importance of theatre collectives becomes even more significant through a lens of theatre production for the purpose of social change, and I wanted the play I directed to work in a similar way.

Another technical problem that we experienced was finding a practical way to play out the scene in which Kit sticks a hand in her pants to show Angie that she is menstruating. How were we going to hide the blood onstage? How could we create something that would look like blood but wouldn’t dry out during the scene? Our props master was innovative and hardworking, but it was the contributions of all the other designers as well as the stage manager that finally came up with the solution of hiding a sponge with red icing on the set behind the girls.

On the day of props cutoff, we had no props to work with. That rehearsal was a stressful one. At the end of the evening, I opened a candid email from my props master describing certain personal problems that she had been having that were getting in the way of her work. Barclay and I were very worried about the state of props in our production, but we were much more worried about how this particular person was doing. We told her to take her time, to let us know if we could do anything, and sent references for professionals we knew in the area who might be able to help. For a few days, we had no props, but the next week our rehearsal began with an inundation of props and set dressing that defied all of our expectations. The emphasis on personal wellness in order to produce good work, as opposed to powering through personal wellness in order to produce work no matter what, had resulted in a healthier person and an impressive level of design, especially given our tiny budget. The interest that this production team had in each other as human beings was a unique one for me, and in my opinion it allowed my designers to produce even better work, knowing that they had the support of the team as a whole behind them. Such a model of teamwork reflects on the concept of women's collectives – artists all working together toward the same goal. The element of teamwork infused through this process led to a great success of feminist theatre, suggesting that such a style of work is one that theatre, as a system dominated by the patriarchy, could benefit from.

The other side of the direction coin was, of course, rehearsals. Our rehearsals also went very differently from those I have become accustomed to participating in. Until this year, I have spent most of my time in the theatre as an actor. As an actor, I have become used to being told what to do by my director. It seems like the natural hierarchy of performance – the director has the larger

artistic vision and is the one in charge, and therefore should be the person telling everyone else what to do. This makes sense to me. I am accustomed to directors, particularly male directors, coming into rehearsal with their script and their notes and an exact image in their mind of how every character should be standing and speaking onstage, sometimes so exactly that I have been told exactly how many inches apart my feet should be and exactly how many seconds a staged kiss should last. While there is definitely comfort in knowing exactly what you're supposed to be doing at any given time, I have also found that such control can stifle actor creativity and original contribution to the character and to the scene. So, when I had my own cast of actors to direct, I decided to do things differently. For one thing, while I had specific moments, dynamics, and tableaux planned out, I wanted to find a way for my actors to come to them on their own, or, more excitingly, to come up with even better choices that I had not thought of. I had entire scenes blocked out in detail in my notes, but very rarely shared them in their entirety in rehearsal. I would often tell the actors where I wanted them to start onstage at the beginning of the scene, or where I wanted them to end up at the end of the scene, or one specific moment where I wanted someone to come forward or someone to sit down, but most of the scenes I asked the actors to feel through initially with no specific blocking. When things did not work, I asked the actors to try something else, often giving suggestions of my own. When things did work, we solidified them and incorporated them into performance. The goal was to help my actors understand that they are an important and contributing part of the creative process, rather than just vehicles for my own artistic vision. Through this method, our finished product, while keeping the themes and dynamics that I felt were most important, ended up

slightly different from what I had originally had in mind, but also much richer and more multifaceted as it grew from the interpretations and contributions of many driven, creative, and intelligent people rather than the single vision of one theatre practitioner. The collaborative nature of this directing style allowed for more ideas in the playing space, which in turn allowed for a more successful piece of work than if I had been making decisions alone.

One of the most prominent activities of our rehearsal periods was the playing of games. While I had specific goals in mind for these games, such as developing characters, boosting energy, and discovering new moments in scenes, I also have written into my notebook at the very beginning of rehearsals, in all capital letters, TEAM BUILDING STUFF. We played a variety of improvisational games. Such games helped the actors to understand what they were competing for in each scene, and pick apart their characters to learn more about them. For example, the actors playing Joyce, Angie, and Kit (Isabelle Baucum, Lindsay Bouchard, and Gabrielle Canning) decided that they wanted to explore their relationships in more depth – how they interact on a normal Saturday morning, for instance. So, we designated a kitchen in our rehearsal space and spent almost an hour working through a typical morning in Joyce’s home. Together, we figured out how breakfast works on Joyce’s day off, Joyce’s risk and hands-off mothering style, what the family rules are for the television, why Kit is so comfortable walking up to the refrigerator and grabbing food for herself. The newfound depths of these relationships provided groundwork for these characters’ scenes together.

An aspect of the play that the group struggled with was the continuously overlapping and interrupting thread of the dialogue. The first scene, set at a

dinner party, in particular, all six characters at the table tell their stories all at once, and constantly interrupt each other to ask questions or explain how they would have responded to a situation differently. For a group of such respectful actors, this scene was agonizing at the beginning of the rehearsal process. Actors did not realize how abruptly or aggressively they needed to interrupt each other – my notes for rehearsal on 8/29/16 said that this scene was “awkward” and “slow.” To help these kind and polite women become more comfortable speaking at the same time, we played a fun and energizing game that soon came to be known as “Got It.” The rules were simple. I would say an arbitrary noun – e.g. an object in the room, a country, a W&M Theatre professor. When two people in the circle thought of a related word, they would say, “got it” (without speaking the word), make eye contact, and, on the count of three, say the word they were thinking of simultaneously. Two other actors would think of a word related to those two words just spoken, and would say, “Got it” and repeat the process, saying two different words. This process would continue until two speakers said the same word. This game got loud, competitive, and enthusiastic, and solved our politeness problem. Games such as these proved immensely helpful throughout the rehearsal process. They helped to instill a sense of competition that my actors simply did not feel toward one another. Scenes would flatten out and become uninteresting because the competition and high stakes that keeps an audience invested weren’t coming through the difficult accents, clever dialogue, and overlapping storytelling. However, fun, high-energy games made these women comfortable with competing with one another.

One of the most interesting games we played during this process was when we all went to a real dinner in character. We were just in a dining hall, but

the lengths that these women went to commit to their historical character while eating dinner was incredible. Catherine Goodson, who played Marlene, spent the entire dinner cutting up her food and chatting about recent diets she had tried. Isabelle Baucum, who played Isabella Byrd, was utterly dismayed at the barbarity of the expectation to eat her chicken fingers and French fries with her hands. Lindsay Bouchard, the actor who played Dull Gret, stole the napkin dispensers and stuffed them into her bag. In this exercise, we finally managed to capture the thing that I referred to in my notes as “the dinner party vibe.” The experience was both a hilarious teambuilding event and also a great exploration of character in an attempt to make these women more “real.”

Our rehearsals took much longer than most rehearsals I had previously experienced, mostly because we talked so much. After one evening of rehearsal in September, I wrote down in my notes, “We do a lot of sitting and talking.” After every run of a scene or part of a scene, I would ask, “How was that?” to my actors, and then we would sit in a circle and talk about things that worked and did not work that particular time. I was very hesitant to give straightforward direction, because I wanted the actors to come to realizations on their own, so instead I asked a lot of questions and waited for the actors to come up with answers that worked for them. Simple questions such as, “What does this interaction mean for you?” “What are you trying to get from this conversation?” “Why are you doing this right now?” and “What is happening here?” contributed hugely to actors reaching important conclusions by themselves. Sometimes, actors would give answers that had not occurred to me but worked better than the answers I had in my mind. Such conversations were a tribute to the collaborative nature of the work, the relationship of trust that formed

between director and actor, and the courage of the actors to put themselves in the vulnerable position of criticizing or offering suggestions to someone in charge of them. Interestingly, when my project advisor, Liz Wiley, sat in on a run-through of the play, the advice she gave me took the same form – that of probing questions rather than straight-on advice. Liz asked questions that I had not thought of about why these particular women need so badly to tell their stories and why Marlene invites each woman specifically. After a month of rehearsal, on 9/14/16, I noted that actors had become “very comfortable giving opinions.” It was immensely valuable to me that these actors would take chances and try new things onstage – even small things, like whispering a line that had not been whispered before, or handing a handkerchief to a character who was crying. Such small things, many of which would never even have occurred to me (one that stands out particularly is the moment where Lady Nijo is crying and Isabella Byrd surreptitiously slides a handkerchief to her while interrupting Lady Nijo to tell a story about herself) added nuance, humor, and relationship to the scenes which with less invested or creative actors could have become boring and slow. One of the greatest moments suggested by an actor was in the last scene, when Joyce and Marlene are fighting about Angie and the future. Marlene says, talking about the women she assists in her career at a job placement company, “If they’re stupid or lazy or frightened, I’m not going to help them get a job, why should I?” and Joyce replies, in reference to Marlene’s daughter Angie whom Joyce is raising, “She’s stupid, lazy and frightened, so what about her?” Lindsay, who played Angie, thought that overhearing this conversation would be a great motivator for Angie to leave home, try to move in with the woman she thinks is her aunt, and talk so confidently about killing her mother. We decided to play

around with blocking the scene in such a way that the audience can see Angie listening behind the door to the kitchen as the adult women talk inside. This simple, silent, unscripted moment communicated so much that I wanted to communicate, and I was happy to incorporate it into the production. I made a point of clearly communicating to my actors when their work contributing to the overall vision of the play, and when it was not. I told them if something they were doing looked off or wasn't reading well, and offered alternate suggestions. I firmly believe that there is an unspoken contract between actor and director: the actor will do what the director tells them, and in return the director will not let the actor look stupid onstage. I think just about any theatrical production of worth takes on this kind of contract. However, in addition to this, I wanted feedback, opinions, and alternative suggestions from my cast, and once I made it clear that I was open to their ideas, they were more than willing to share.

While I always meant to encourage actors to come up with new things on their own, and reach my conclusions without my lecturing them or telling them exactly what to do, it is worth noting that one of my actors had never been in a play before. She was much more hesitant to take chances and much more shy, to a point where at the beginning of the process she had trouble projecting in a way that made her audible. In addition to the time that I put aside with her separately, to teach her how to score a scene, to play tactics and goals and to compete, the rest of the cast were incredibly helpful. They patiently and thoughtfully taught her the meaning of stage directions, what it means to cheat out, and other basic tenets of performance that it had not occurred to me that she wouldn't know. This kind of collaboration and willingness to work together as a team was the most valuable thing about this group of actors. By performance

time, this actor was doing a fantastic job, and it is all thanks to the individual attention she received both from me as a director trying to be patient and helpful and also from her cast who put hours of free time into helping her become a better actor, and as a result into helping this production succeed.

One of the greatest examples of the uniqueness of my team was during load-in. Load-in is possibly the most harrowing day when preparing for a performance, where all of the design elements get set up in the performance space. In my load-in experiences, these days are long, miserable, and almost universally end in arguments, irritation, and low morale. My lighting designer, Megan Screen, described this experience as “the best load-in I’ve ever been a part of.” First of all, even though it was not required for the actors to be there, every single one of them showed up. Megan also said that this cast gave her more respect than she has ever received from actors at a load-in, to a point where they set her up to change her opinion about actors and their ability to respect designers altogether. The sense of teamwork with which this group was instilled from the very beginning of the process allowed for a sense of deference to the people in charge and respect for the work being done. We were able to work efficiently and positively with each other, and finished in record time, only four hours into the day, in spite of the unusually complicated set and props.

My direction professor, Dr. Richard Palmer, spoke often of the “the feminist director” as a direction ideal. The “feminist director” focuses on the work of the group as an ensemble or team. She is not only open to ideas and suggestions from designers and actors, but encourages it. In her cast, she hopes to instill a sense of the play as a whole as well as important character and story developments through games and exercises. I believe this direction and

leadership style worked well with the work and themes of the play. Such a work, in which time lines and character arcs are not organized in a linear or typical way, encourages this kind of direction, in which everyone involved has a chance to experiment and play.

Chapter Four: What Now? Intersectionality

Where is feminist theatre today? Since the eighties, and the gradual decrease in women's groups and spaces such as the WOW Café, it seems that feminist theatre, in the tradition of the suffragettes all the way to Caryl Churchill, seems to be coming to an end. Helene Keyssar writes in an interview with Caryl Churchill from 1983 that she worried that she would become the "token woman: 'Ah, but we publish/produce Caryl Churchill' would be the excuse of those who ignored other work by women" (199). For quite some time, such excuses seem to have been made, and women artists of many different backgrounds seem to have been ignored or erased. However, the inheritors of the feminist wave that brought us this kind of incredible theatre are those who focus on much more intersectional work. Intersectionality in feminism (and in theatre) involves the understanding that not all women face the same kind of oppression. Depending on sexuality, race, socioeconomic class, and many other factors, women's life experiences are different. Intersectional artists aim to address those differences and give them representation in their art.

Feminist theatre was dominated in the 1970s by white, middle class women whose work did not represent many women of different experiences and backgrounds, including white working class women or Black women from any class background (Aston, 75). Intersectionality was not an especial interest for many feminist writers of the seventies, eighties, and some of the nineties. While Caryl Churchill included work that gave voice to working-class, northern women, as well as a diversity of perspectives on gender and sexuality in *Cloud 9*,

in terms of race and cultural background she is much less intersectional, and as a white British woman, she could not be considered qualified to write characters of very different backgrounds and experiences. We can see in *Top Girls* that Churchill remains faithful to the problems and interests of mostly white women. With the exception of Lady Nijo, every single historical woman in Act One is from the Western historical or artistic tradition. While the characters in the rest of the play do not have a specified race or ethnicity (except for the requirements demanded by the roles, which is, again, for most of them to be white), they all appear to be straight and of a particular class and education that allows them the opportunity to pursue careers in business. When I was casting *Top Girls* at William and Mary last semester, I made the decision to cast the role of Patient Griselda/Nell as a person of color. While Patient Griselda is a character of western European tradition, she is also a fairy tale character, so I felt that we could take much more liberty in interpreting her character, and since Arika was the best actor for the role, it only made sense to cast her. At the time, I didn't think much of it. However, it was pointed out to me much later that by casting this actor in this role, I was making a statement about casting and about the story of Patient Griselda and *Top Girls*. Patient Griselda is, to Marlene's scorn, the "perfect wife," the woman who follows her husband's orders even to the point of sacrificing her children and her marriage, all because she loves him. By placing the one Black actor in the play in this role, Griselda's passive and servile position became a reflection on expectations for Black women in society. I believe that it was the right decision, because as a story written in the eighties mostly for and about white women, I think that in updating it for the twenty-first century we need to acknowledge that many of the problems discussed in the play are

problems that are faced by women of color even more than they are faced by white women. Nell is hardworking, ambitious, and a “high-flyer” as she describes herself, yet is passed up for promotion by Marlene, and I think that by casting Nell as a person of color we make statements about the kind of prejudice that she has faced in the workplace as well. To quote Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, “the political situation of white, middle-class, college-educated women has changed over the last twenty-five years” (xxvi). The situation for many other women has changed very little.

One of the reasons that playwrights so often avoid intersectionality is that it is often divisive. We base our art and entertainment on universal or shared experiences, which becomes more and more difficult as our experiences as a cultural and literary collective become more and more diverse. In a world where theatre is dependent on grants and other forms of government funding, there is much national debate on how the taxpayer’s money should be spent. However, as Jill Dolan says in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, “the Right still controls the terms of the debate, so the imaginary taxpaying citizen is never an LGBT person, a person of color, or even a political progressive” (xxi). As long as the arts are dependent on government money, they will be subject to the whims of those in power, which will often mean that diverse people of different backgrounds will be ignored or erased. Also, critics do not always receive plays with nontraditional characters in nontraditional roles especially well. For example, *Night, Mother* (1983), the Marsha Norman play in which her protagonist makes a (very masculinized) decision to take her life into her own hands by ending it, received reviews from some male critics who found themselves unable to relate to a middle-aged single woman who lives with her mother, and dismissed it,

unable to see the value of something they couldn't understand. Some critics found it more believable that Jessie chooses to end her own life because she is overweight and unattractive, unable to understand the helplessness, hopelessness, and boredom that Jessie gives clearly as her reasoning throughout the play. With such a reception, it is no wonder that playwrights are hesitant to give voice to characters that are even more different from the standard protagonist of patriarchal art.

An example of one of the most fascinating and most successful groups of intersectional art is Chicano playwriting. As a group of people who are Mexican immigrants or descended from Mexican immigrants, Chicano writers understand what it is to live as a different culture within a dominant culture. Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, in her article *The Female Subject in Chicano Theatre*, says that the initial goals of the Chicano theatre movement were, "to create an alternative to the dominant mode of production of mainstream theatre, to make theatre accessible to a working class Chicano audience, to validate forms of working class Chicano culture, and to create accurate theatrical representations of Chicanos' historical and social experience" (389). This infrastructure provided a distinctive purpose within Chicano theatre that is missing from the collective plays of white feminists. With the founding of TENAZ (National Teatros of Aztlan) in 1970, the movement was able to move forward exponentially, as the organization was able to fund theatre festivals and seminars, as it continues to do to this day (Yarbrow-Bejarano, 390). In the 1970s, Chicano artistic movements focused less on the economic exploitation of Chicano people as a class and more on nationalist pride of Chicano culture in opposition to Anglo-American culture, which "was perceived as materialist and impersonal" (390). Such an emphasis on personal

pride in Chicano culture and society was important for a group of people living in a country permeated by racism and degrading stereotypes of Mexicans. However, such cultural pride also led to what Yarbrow-Bejarano describes as “a static view of culture, including the uncritical evaluation of the family and gender roles” (390). Because of this emphasis on cultural pride and the view of “women’s lib” as an invention of white oppressors, Chicana women were forced into traditional roles and given very few decision-making opportunities. Chicana feminists risked marginalization for their recognition of gender oppression in addition to class and racial oppression.

However, Chicana playwrights soon found a form of feminist, Chicano-style playwriting of their own. In 1978, WIT (Women In Teatro) was established, on the grounds that TENAZ was not meeting the needs of female theatre workers (Yarbrow-Bejarano, 396). Another response to the male-dominated Chicano theatre movement was the establishment of all-female teatros (397). The unique blend of poetry, music, and other storytelling techniques are a result of the lack of trained Chicano playwrights in the community, but resulted in a unique Chicano aesthetic in playwriting. In 1981, the play *Reunion*, produced by the Teatro Yerbabuena addressed homosexuality, a subject of cultural taboo, for the first time in a broad way in Chicano theatre. An important landmark in feminist Chicano theatre is the play *Giving Up the Ghost*, a 1986 play by Cherríe Moraga about a lesbian Chicana woman named Marisa, and Corky, her childhood self. Neither Marisa nor Corky conform to traditional gender codes for “woman,” creating room for discussion in Chicano theatre about traditional ideas of gender and gender representation (403). Corky, in her attraction to women, associates herself with men, and therefore sees herself as dominant and

aggressive, viewing women is the “Other” to be dominated. However, when she is raped, she is forced to see herself for the first time inescapably as a woman (405). Says Yarbrow-Bejarano, “Marisa loves women, but her capacity to be loved by them is thwarted by her anger and fear of betrayal by women through the culture’s mandate of putting the man first” (404). Such cultural mandates within Chicano culture, as well as racist cultural mandates of the dominant white culture, are challenged by feminist Chicano theatre.

A group of women that has existed in the United States for far too long with barely any respectful mainstream representation is that of Black women. Black feminist playwrights have been working to add their perspectives to the feminist movement for decades, but have received much less attention than their white peers. Annette Henry in her article *Black Feminist Pedagogy* discusses the problem of white feminists blind to the diversity of experience and beliefs of Black feminists tending to put the all in the same group as if they all held the same ideals and wanted the same things, but as a large group of women with a diversity of ideological and economic backgrounds, cannot be lumped into one group as a class (90). Judith L. Stephens, in an article about the anti-lynch play that became common in the early twentieth century, believes that the anti-lynch play (*Rachel* (1916), by Angelina Grimke and *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918), are two of nine produced over a twenty-year period that the author discusses directly) establishes a critical framework for the struggle of racial and gender ideologies during this time using black feminist theory, which she defines as “methods of examining text which hold the variables of race, class, and gender in balance, thereby destabilizing the centrality of any one category and thus representing the particular conditions of black women’s oppression in this country” (330). These

women also are known for plays in support of abortion access, some even published in *The Birth Control Review* (Anderson, 5). Anderson describes Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as a peak of black feminist playwriting in this era (7).

While various articles and theses have been written on these historical plays as a beginning for black feminist theatre in the United States, Lisa M. Anderson in her book *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* states that Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, which premiered in 1974, marks a beginning of black feminist theatre for many scholars (1). Anderson writes that black women have often been excluded from the big picture because "as 'the' black aesthetic attempted to remove gender from a codified authentic blackness or black experience, feminist theory and aesthetics imagined a female identity uncomplicated by race or class" (2). In other words, while those focusing on racial equality often excluded women, those focusing on gender equality often excluded people of color. Black feminists were less concerned with the right to work, mostly because many Black women were already working jobs outside the home, but were more interested in, "issues of retaining relationships with black men within families, liberation from the negative images of black women (particularly that of sexually available, promiscuous black women), acceptance for black lesbians and gay men in black communities, and inclusion in the word 'woman'" (Anderson, 12).

In Nathan Stith's article, *Stereotyping Playwrights*, he discusses at length the unique space that the LGBTQ community has occupied in the theatre world. One of the subjects of his article is Edward Albee, a noted playwright who has won multiple awards, and is hesitant to call himself a "gay playwright," because

he believes that good art should be judged on its merits regardless of the person who created it (Stith, 25). However, while this is a good objective and enters into the sense that everyone should be viewed equally and without discrimination, it seems to discount the incredible work that the queer community has put into representing themselves in art, and the struggle for visibility that people of non-normative sexualities and genders have had to deal with.

In 2016, New York Times journalist Alexis Soloski spoke with three transgender playwrights who were all having work produced at the time. MJ Kaufman, Basil Kreimendahl, and Jess Barbagello are all playwrights in New York City who recently have been getting a lot more attention, in part because of the writing that they do about experiences and struggles particular to transgender people. They also discussed their aversion to pigeonholed as trans playwrights, Barbagello saying, "I don't like feeling tokenized or like other parts of my person are being overshadowed. Sometimes when people are asking me to speak on a panel or come to a lecture, I'm like, come see my play. Come see the art" (nytimes). The conflict between visibility and tokenization becomes more and more extreme as artists fight not only to be represented onstage but also to keep themselves from being represented as stereotypes, comedic, or less than human. For example, a problem that has come up a few times in the past couple years, *The Danish Girl*, where Eddie Redmayne played the lead role, being one of them, is where non-transgender or gender non-conforming people having played the parts of transgender or gender non-conforming roles. Says Kaufman, "I am trying to push the conversation away from this authenticity bias of who can do the role most realistically and toward a labor justice question of who's getting cast and who's not. Trans actors have a harder time getting cast even in trans

roles and this shouldn't be true" (nytimes). The playwrights in this interview mention that as white transmasculine writers, they don't presume to speak for all transgender artists. Such an understanding of differences in position and life experience highlighted for me that feminist theatre practitioners are those who are sympathetic to the suffering and life experiences of everyone, and want to elevate the stories of the unheard so that they will be seen by all, no matter who those stories belong to.

Casey Llewellyn is another trans playwright with work published in New York. In 2016, her interpretation of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, was performed at the Foundry Theater (nytimes). I think it is interesting that while the three transmen in the above paragraph were interviewed extensively about their work and their lives, there is nothing in the New York Times website archives concerning an interview with Llewellyn or any other transwoman. Such an observation seems to point to the fact that while feminism and intersectionality in feminism have made great strides, there is still much progress to make.

The lukewarm reception that such theatre sometimes receives does not diminish the importance of that theatre. If theatre is to accurately reflect on life, then all lives must be reflected, even those that have so often been left unrepresented. The next step that feminist theatre is taking is one of intersectionality and inclusivity. It reflects the idea that there is no single experience that sums up being a woman, and all forms of womanhood are worthy of attention and respect. A few playwrights of the new millennium who have done an excellent job of bringing women of all different groups into the circle include Cherrïe Moraga, a Chicano lesbian playwright who uses folklore and myth to explore the experiences of queer Chicano women, Suzan Lori-Parks,

an African American playwright experimenting with new forms of playwriting and storytelling, and Jo Clifford, a transgender playwright and activist based in the UK. With such an incredible group of feminists working in theatre, we can see that feminism has made great strides in the past few decades as we have moved beyond the problems of only white, middle-class women to begin to embrace people of all different lives and experiences. However, it is important to remember that the job isn't done. The importance of celebrating diversity and all people is an ideal that the feminist movement, and theatre practitioners, can't forget and can't allow to slip away now when we have made so much progress.

Conclusion

To experience feminist theatre is to experience feminism in action. After directing a production of *Top Girls*, and doing all of the research that was necessary to put on a show so steeped in history and theory, I felt that for the first time I truly understood what it is to be a feminist theatre practitioner. Fighting for the equal treatment and opportunity of all women involves the acceptance of a challenge that when achieved will make our world a more just and more beautiful place for all women.

One important way to rise to that challenge is to make art. Theatre is a powerful tool for humanity. Through its ability to connect and to bring people together, I believe that theatre still has an important role to play in the feminist movement. As feminists move to accept and fight for all women through intersectionality, playwriting has become an important way to fuel that exposure to diversity. Teaching us about the lives and struggles of people we do not know and who are not like us will help us to develop empathy with groups of people that we may have never thought about before. That kind of connection is the purpose that theatre serves in our increasingly impersonal world, where entire battles are fought online.

My experience directing such an important piece of feminist theatre has taught me that feminist leadership and feminist collectives, where processes are experimental, where everyone's voice is heard, and where ideas are based on their merit rather than where they come from, work. They work well. And we as

a society are slowly gravitating toward a world that embraces collectivity, creativity, and all people no matter who they are or where they come from.

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