THE SUFFRAGETTE SPEAKS

Bensusan as Playwright

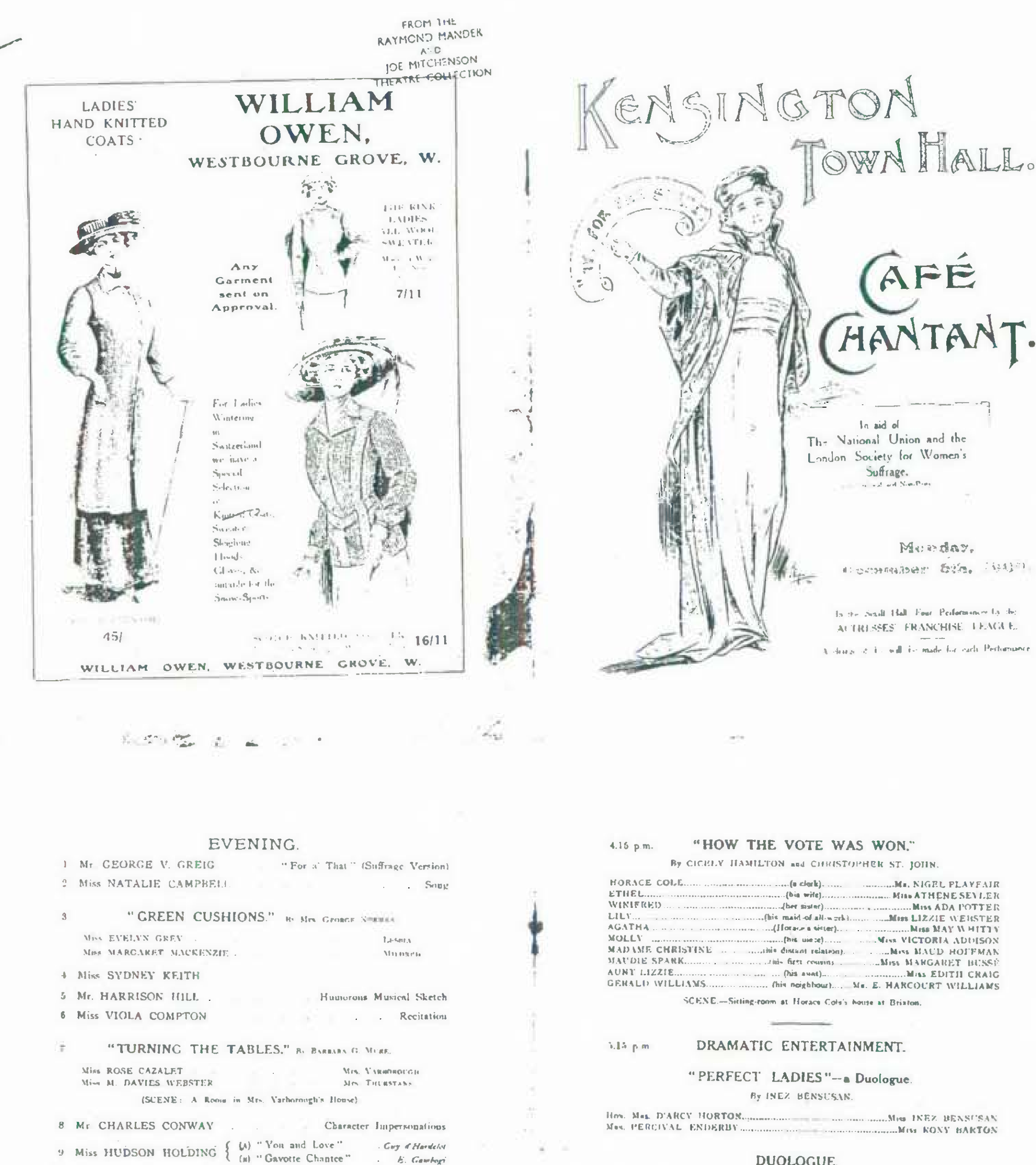
This chapter consists of a critical examination of three plays written by Bensusan: *Perfect Ladies* (1909),*The Apple* (1909), and *Nobody's Sweetheart* (1911). Although there are performance records for all three plays, scripts of only the last two survive. A fourth play, *The Prodigal Passes* (1914), is not discussed here due to space constraints.[1] *The Apple* is a recognised and popular play of the period, and has received some recent critical attention. This examination increases that attention, and asks that the play be regarded in a different critical light. *Nobody's Sweetheart* has not been investigated—or to my knowledge even located—by contemporary readers, and subsequently will receive critical discussion for the first time. What kind of playwright was Inez Bensusan?

PERFECT LADIES

With such a promising title, it is disappointing that no copy of this play, dated 1909, has survived. If Bensusan registered *Perfect Ladies* with the the Lord Chamberlain, it did not pass the censor's scrutiny. The only evidence remaining of the existence of *Perfect Ladies* is a program, which reveals certain aspects of Bensusan's philosophy as a playwright. As the program (shown below) indicates, this event which included a performance of *Perfect Ladies* was in keeping with the 'we support all and favour none' policy of the AFL. In aid of the National Union and the London Society for Women's Suffrage (self-declared 'Constitutional and Non-Party'), it was held at the large performance venue of Kensington Town Hall.

The program began in mid afternoon and offered ten events, including plays, comic sketches and songs. This entertainment feast indicates that large crowds attended these popular events. The plays (*A Woman's Influence*, by Gertrude Jennings, *How the Vote*

[1] This play is cited as having been performed in 1914 in Allardyce Nicoll, *English Drama 1900-1930*, Cambridge, 1973, p. 508. A critical analysis of this play should comprise any project devoted to a fuller understanding of Bensusan, but is not essential to this exploration.



FROM THE RAYMOND MANDER AND JOE MITCHENSON THEATRE COLLECTION

LADIES' HAND KNITTED COATS

WILLIAM OWEN, WESTBOURNE GROVE, W.

Any Garment sent on Approval.

7/11

45/

16/11

WILLIAM OWEN, WESTBOURNE GROVE, W.

KENSINGTON TOWN HALL.

CAFÉ CHANTANT.

In aid of The National Union and the London Society for Women's Suffrage.

Monday,

In the Small Hall Four Performances by the ACTRESSES' FRANCHISE LEAGUE.

EVENING.

1 Mr. GEORGE V. GREIG — "For a' That" (Suffrage Version)
2 Miss NATALIE CAMPBELL — Song

3 "GREEN CUSHIONS."

Miss EVELYN GREY
Miss MARGARET MACKENZIE

4 Miss SYDNEY KEITH
5 Mr. HARRISON HILL — Humorous Musical Sketch
6 Miss VIOLA COMPTON — Recitation

7 "TURNING THE TABLES."

Miss ROSE CAZALET — Mrs. Yarborough
Miss M. DAVIES WEBSTER — Mrs. Thurstans

(SCENE: A Room in Mrs. Yarborough's House)

8 Mr. CHARLES CONWAY — Character Impersonations
9 Miss HUDSON HOLDING — (a) "You and Love" — *Guy d'Hardelot*; (b) "Gavotte Chantee" — *E. Gambogi*
10 Miss B. G. VULLIAMY — "Soapyiska" Comic Sketch

Stage Managers: Miss BERTHA N. GRAHAM and Mr. GEORGE V. GREIG
Accompanist: Mr. DENHAM HARRISON

THE ACTRESSES' FRANCHISE LEAGUE

3.30 p.m. "A WOMAN'S INFLUENCE."

By GERTRUDE JENNINGS

Characters

HERBERT LAWRENCE — Mr. E. HARCOURT WILLIAMS
MARGARET LAWRENCE — Miss JEAN STERLING McKINLAY
Miss THICKET — Miss EDITH CRAIG
MARY BALL — Miss CLARE GREET
Mrs. PERRY — Miss ELAINE INESCOURT

SCENE.—Sitting Room at Mrs. Lawrence's

4.15 p.m. "HOW THE VOTE WAS WON."

By CICELY HAMILTON and CHRISTOPHER ST. JOHN.

HORACE COLE (a clerk) — Mr. NIGEL PLAYFAIR
ETHEL (his wife) — Miss ATHENE SEYLER
WINIFRED (her sister) — Miss ADA POTTER
LILY (his maid-of-all-work) — Miss LIZZIE WEBSTER
AGATHA (Horace's sister) — Miss MAY WHITTY
MOLLY (his niece) — Miss VICTORIA ADDISON
MADAME CHRISTINE (his distant relation) — Miss MAUD HOFFMAN
MAUDIE SPARK (his first cousin) — Miss MARGARET BUSSÉ
AUNT LIZZIE (his aunt) — Miss EDITH CRAIG
GERALD WILLIAMS (his neighbour) — Mr. E. HARCOURT WILLIAMS

SCENE.—Sitting-room at Horace Cole's house at Brixton.

DRAMATIC ENTERTAINMENT.

"PERFECT LADIES"—a Duologue.

By INEZ BENSUSAN.

Hon. Mrs. D'ARCY HORTON — Miss INEZ BENSUSAN
Mrs. PERCIVAL ENDERBY — Miss KONY BARTON

DUOLOGUE.

Miss JANETTE STEER.

"'ENERY BROWN." A Duologue.

Miss GILLIAN SCAIFE and Miss JOAN DILLA

"HOW THE VOTE WAS WON."

By CICELY HAMILTON and CHRISTOPHER ST. JOHN.

HORACE COLE (a clerk) — Mr. NIGEL PLAYFAIR
ETHEL (his wife) — Miss ATHENE SEYLER
WINIFRED (her sister) — Miss ADA POTTER
LILY (his maid-of-all-work) — Miss LIZZIE WEBSTER
AGATHA (Horace's sister) — Miss MAY WHITTY
MOLLY (his niece) — Miss VICTORIA ADDISON
MADAME CHRISTINE (his distant relation) — Miss MAUD HOFFMAN
MAUDIE SPARK (his first cousin) — Miss MARGARET BUSSÉ
AUNT LIZZIE (his aunt) — Miss EDITH CRAIG
GERALD WILLIAMS (his neighbour) — Mr. O. P. HEGGIE

Figure 8.1 *Front and back cover from the program of the Actresses' Franchise League event which included* Perfect Ladies, *dated 6 December 1909 (MM).*

Was Won by Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St John—performed twice daily, *Perfect Ladies* by Inez Bensusan, *Duologue* by Janette Steer, and *'Enery Brown* by Gillian Scaife and Joan Dilla) were performed in the secondary venue of the 'Small Hall', charging the admission price of 1/- for each performance.

Perfect Ladies was performed at 5.15 pm, with Bensusan herself performing one of the two roles (both female). This is the only located example where Bensusan performed in her own work, which could mean one of two things: it had been a 'mistake' which she did not repeat again; or more probably (December 1909 still being relatively early days for the AFL), Bensusan was setting an example about involvement and commitment. Many of the writers for the AFL were actresses, and all members were busy professional women. It is typical of Bensusan that she would take on extra duties, and in her role as head of the play department, cast actresses in her colleague's plays before her own. These politics of performance aside, what is important about *Perfect Ladies* is that it was a duologue, and quite different from scripts that have survived from Bensusan's other plays.

Little more can be ascertained about *Perfect Ladies* from the available evidence, but even something so seemingly insignificant as a stray program of a lost play can considerably 'mark' Bensusan's reputation as a playwright. From the information contained in this program, Bensusan's feminist philosophies as they were expressed through performance can be ascertained. The program tells various stories, including that it is acceptable: to be political (to associate your work with a suffrage event); to be public about those politics (to seek high exposure at a popular entertainment event); to be professional (charge admission); and to be brave about those decisions (perform in your own work, and control your own professional circumstances). It is with these 'markings' in mind that Bensusan's later plays should be considered.

THE APPLE

'Grimly realistic' is how Sheila Stowell describes *The Apple*, one of the AFL's most popular performance pieces.[2] At the height of its popularity from 1910/11 it was performed regularly, and this celebrity did not begin to wane until 1913.[3] A play about women and freedom, and how male control usurps the pursuit of that freedom, *The Apple* was an ambitious suffrage drama. It forcefully and effectively took the concerns of the women's movements beyond the parameters of agitating for the vote, to the singular issue underpinning the entire suffrage movement as a whole: equality.

Dramatic action in *The Apple* centres on Helen Payson, an office worker who decides to abandon her compromising life circumstances and emigrate to Canada. This decision is crystalised by an incident of sexual harassment involving her boss, Nigel Dean, who also happens to be a friend of her father, as well as the employer of her brother, Cyril, 'the apple' (so called because he is the apple of his parents' eyes). Helen arrives home after the 'incident' only to learn that Cyril is demanding both her and their sister Ann's share of an inheritance in order to finance a business partnership and secure his pretentious marriage prospects. Ann's attempts to placate Helen only increases her determination to carry through with her plans, but she wavers when Nigel Dean arrives. He reminds her that their relationship has been mutually beneficial, and implies that her withdrawal of 'services' may jeopardise his required endorsement of Cyril's promotion, and the good name of her family. Her hands thus tied, Helen declares 'the apple' the victor.

The dramatic question of the play, on one level, is: 'Will Helen receive her fair share of the inheritance and fulfil her dream of a new life, or will her rights be sacrificed to Cyril's perceived greater needs?' On another level, the play poses the larger question of 'Why do women feel so antagonistic about their life circumstances?' Cyril poses this neatly when he asks after one of Helen's outbursts 'Why's she got her knife into me?' [148].[4] Bensusan offers some cutting explanations during the course of the dramatic action, exploring who is to blame for the situation where women only ever seem to have

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[2] Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*, Manchester, 1992, p. 3.

[3] Viv Gardner, *Sketches From the Actresses' Franchise League*, Nottingham, 1985, p. 30.

[4] This and all subsequent quotations are taken from *The Apple* as published in D Spender & C Hayman (eds), *'How The Vote Was Won' and Other Suffragette Plays*, London, 1985.

inferior life options compared to men. *The Apple*, regarded in this light, can be seen as a treatise on women's discontent, disillusionment, and anger. There are no solutions mapped out in the play, but the message of the play is unwavering in its implication that it is up to women to change those inequitable circumstances which oppress them. As Hirshfield says, the 'unpretty picture' of exploitation painted in *The Apple* clearly 'insisted on the necessity of the vote in order to correct economic and social wrongs'.[5]

Viv Gardner comments that most of the AFL plays had a 'single-mindedness' and that this, coupled with 'the nature of the audiences to whom they were performed confirm[ed] their function as affirmative rather than subversive or agitational work'.[6] *The Apple* was a subtle exception to that norm. While it was 'affirmative' in that it demonstrated the need for the recognition of women's rights, the play's bleak conclusion asked something more of the audience: it was a subversive call for direct action to enable change. AFL performances attracted not only converted feminists but also, as mentioned victoriously in one annual report, 'the most obstinate of Antis, and more important still, members of that class most difficult of all to get at "the women who take no interest at all" in Votes For Women'.[7] The subversive nature of *The Apple* would have been thrown into even starker contrast in these circumstances. Exploring that argument, this analysis will focus initially on The *Apple* 's contemporary reception, then move on to consider recent critical discussions of the play. A revised reading is offered which contests previous accounts.

Production history and contemporary reviews

The Apple had its first public performance at the Court Theatre for a single matinee on 14 March 1909. For the next few years it became almost standard fare at large AFL events, including fetes and fairs, and was usually performed as part of a larger program including anything from other suffrage plays to dancing, singing, and recitations. *The Apple* raised funds for various organisation ranging from the AFL to London churches, usually under

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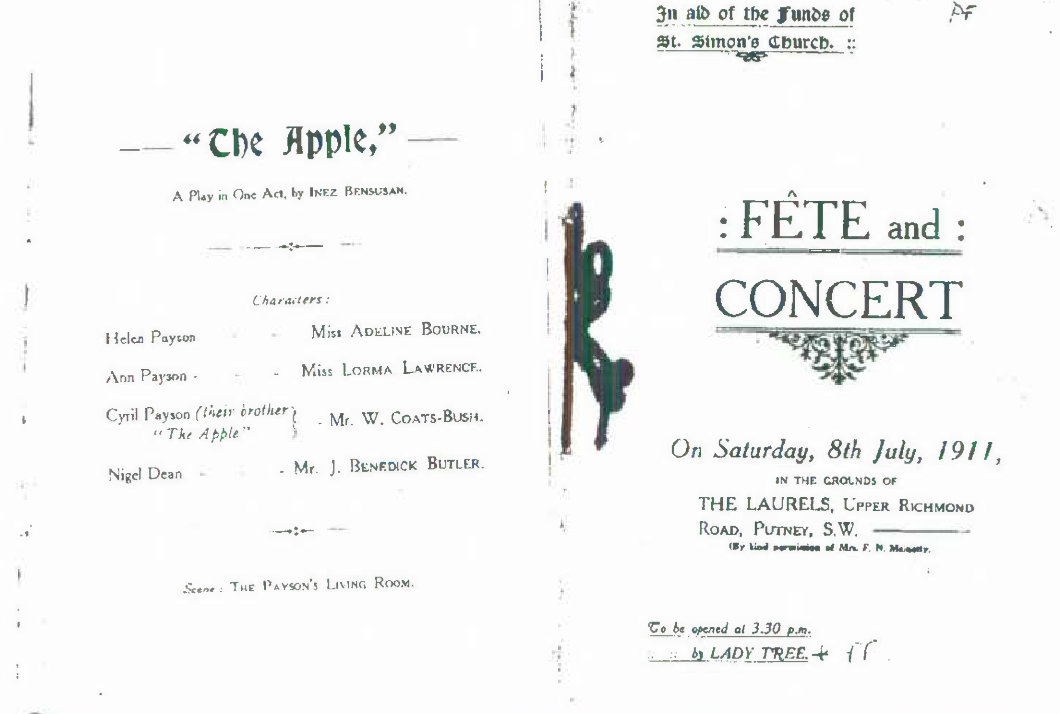
[5] Hirshfield, 'The Suffragist as Playwright in Edwardian England', *Frontiers*, vol IX, no 2, 1987, p. 4.
[6] Viv Gardner, 'Introduction', *op. cit.*, p. 5.
[7] Quoted in *ibid*, p. 3.



In aid of the Funds of
St. Simon's Church. ::

"The Apple,"

A Play in One Act, by Inez Bensusan.

Characters:

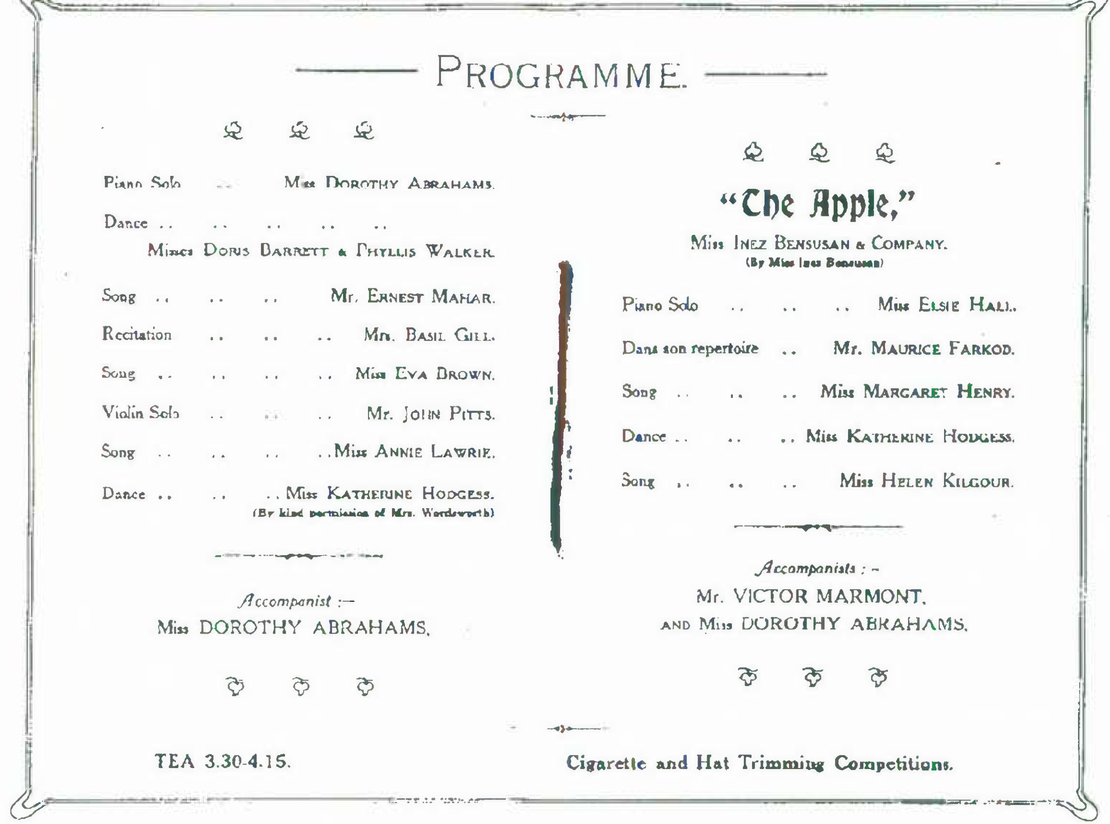
Helen Payson	Miss Adeline Bourne.
Ann Payson	Miss Lorma Lawrence.
Cyril Payson (*their brother*) "*The Apple*"	Mr. W. Coats-Bush.
Nigel Dean	Mr. J. Benedick Butler.

Scene: The Payson's Living Room.

: FÊTE and :
CONCERT

On Saturday, 8th July, 1911,
in the grounds of
THE LAURELS, Upper Richmond Road, Putney, S.W.
(By kind permission of Mrs. F. N. Maisetty.)

To be opened at 3.30 p.m.
by LADY TREE.



PROGRAMME.

Piano Solo ..	Miss Dorothy Abrahams.
Dance	Misses Doris Barrett & Phyllis Walker.
Song	Mr. Ernest Mahar.
Recitation	Mrs. Basil Gill.
Song	Miss Eva Brown.
Violin Solo	Mr. John Pitts.
Song	Miss Annie Lawrie.
Dance	Miss Katherine Hodgess. (By kind permission of Mrs. Wordsworth)

Accompanist:—
Miss DOROTHY ABRAHAMS.

"The Apple,"
Miss Inez Bensusan & Company.
(By Miss Inez Bensusan)

Piano Solo	Miss Elsie Hall.
Dans son repertoire ..	Mr. Maurice Farkoa.
Song	Miss Margaret Henry.
Dance	Miss Katherine Hodgess.
Song	Miss Helen Kilgour.

Accompanists:—
Mr. VICTOR MARMONT,
and Miss DOROTHY ABRAHAMS.

TEA 3.30-4.15.

Cigarette and Hat Trimming Competitions.

Figure 8.2 *This program is from a July 1911 performance of* The Apple *held at a fete in Putney (MM). In this instance, Bensusan's play was the main attraction.*

Bensusan's direction herself. It is impossible to calculate exactly how much revenue *The Apple* created. Bensusan noted on the copy held in the Lord Chamberlain's collection that 'the fee for every performance of this play is one Guinea'. Extant programs vary in the admission price charged for performances. One Christmas fair, where the play was performed twice daily, charged one shilling for numbered and reserved seating.[8]

Easier to calculate than revenue figures, critical response to *The Apple* appeared in various London newspapers. Those discussed here deal with the March 1909 production at the Court Theatre. *The Apple* was part of a program of four short plays produced by The Play Actors, and deemed by one critic as 'worth producing', with 'two of them having real merit of the kind which one is entitled to look for in the production of such a society'.[9] One of the plays was dismissed as 'purely conventional'; another recommended as being little more than 'amusing in a farcical way'; the remaining two were judged as 'valuable things', but it was *The Apple* 'which left the most marked impression on the mind':

> Miss Bensusan wrote it with determination to say strong things about the sacrifices sisters sometimes have to make to brothers, and the position of Lady typists in City offices. The play was a little ragged in construction and unnecessarily vague in its ending; but the things were well said, and Miss Adeline Bourne [as Helen] made good use of an opportunity for the expression of earnest indignation.[10]

The comment about the play having an 'unnecessarily vague' ending is very revealing. Although Helen has lost this battle, the audience is left with the feeling that the war is far from over. The only decision Helen has made is the one regarding her claim on the inheritance. What she is going to do about the future of her job or relationship with Nigel is open to interpretation. As yet another reviewer noted 'She will presumably go back to her place in the City; but Miss Bensusan leaves it an open question whether Dean will again try to kiss Helen, and whether she would use a ruler next time'.[11] This

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[8] Program for a 'Christmas Fair and Fete, 4-9 December 1911', Maude Arncliffe-Sennett Papers, vol 16, p. 2 (BL).

[9] Anonymous review, *The Sketch*, 24 March 1909, p. 338.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Anonymous review, *The Stage*, 18 March 1909, p. 15.

ambiguity was deliberate on Bensusan's part, and is an example of feminist dramaturgy which moves away from the certain closures expected in conventional theatre practice.

Another critic said of the four plays on offer that 'it is pleasant to be able to state that each item on the program had some merit'.[12] This reviewer's synopsis of *The Apple* indicates that the play was received as Bensusan intended:

> 'The Apple' is the nickname given to the lackadaisical young gentleman, who is permitted every opportunity of enjoying himself and generally taking life easy, while his two sisters have to drudge for a livelihood—one as a typist and the other as the domestic worker in the home.[13]

Helen's 'consent to sacrifice herself' for the good of the 'Pay/son' family is easily recognised by the reviewer. It is also interesting that this 1909 review acknowledged Ann as being a 'worker', on equal standing with Helen, in a period when the commercial value of women's domestic duties was not usually conceded. This suggests that the review was written by someone familiar with the tenets of feminism, or at least the conditions of domestic work.

Even the least favourable review found little fault with the quality of the dramatic writing, but instead focussed criticism on the plausibility of the dramatic situation. The tone of the review is indignant, decrying that British men are a better breed than Bensusan's representation of Nigel and Cyril allows. Cyril is readily acknowledged as being 'spoilt and selfish' and 'a most offensive young bounder', and Nigel is berated for his unabashed nonchalance considering that he, as a married man, had kissed Helen.[14] This reviewer, perhaps offended because his manhood was being insulted, missed the balanced treatment that Bensusan gave all of her characters, including the male ones. Neither Cyril nor Nigel are without their redeeming qualities, and Bensusan does not lay the blame for women's oppression neatly at the foot of men. This will be discussed further shortly.

The reviewer, unmarked by this complex character treatment, mistakenly criticises Bensusan for writing 'a little tract on behalf of the Advanced Woman movement', not because of the events presented in *The Apple*, but because of the perceived unsympathetic

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[12] Anonymous review, *Era*, 20 March 1909, p 15.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Anonymous review, *The Stage*, 18 March 1909, p. 15

treatment of the male characters. Revenge for this misdemeanour is sought through petty dismissals of the female characters, while paradoxically also acknowledging the 'dull, drab existence, without hope or pleasure' of the women. 'Poor Helen' is soon being described an 'indignant girl' full of 'bitterness'. This antipathy was transferred onto the actress playing Helen: 'The bitterness and bad temper of the down-trodden business girl were shown...with rather too much intensity by Miss Adeline Bourne'.[15] It is almost as though, offended by the male representation, the reviewer loses all empathy for the plight of women, and can only justify siding with Cyril and Nigel by finding fault with the personality of the female characters.

Another reading

These reviews give some indication of how *The Apple* was received in its own time. Recent critical appraisals of the play agree that *The Apple* was a drama concerned with an incident of sexual harassment, and that this example of exploitation functioned as a metaphor for women's oppression as a disenfranchised class.[16] This reading can easily be imposed, but is it the only one which Bensusan intended? While *The Apple* deserves the 'feminist stripes' it has earned through new critical evaluations, it is a play with a different agenda than is commonly recognised. That agenda was nevertheless of critical concern to Edwardian feminists, and society in general: what constitutes proper female behaviour? This reading attempts to locate the play's original flavour and, rather than applauding *The Apple*'s appeal to feminist tastes in the 1990s, tries to understand what was important to women theatre practitioners and audiences in 1909. Before testing this fresh reading of the play, it is essential to recognise the characters in the drama as Bensusan introduced them.

The characters

Bensusan describes Ann as 'a slight short-sighted girl about 27', who 'looks older, as though all her life she has been overworked' [143]. She is described as 'alert, active, [and]

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[15] *Ibid.*

[16] See for example Stowell, who says that 'it is worth noting that for Helen the workplace simply duplicates the oppression of the home': *op. cit.*, p. 48.

nervous', despite the obvious weary nature of the work in which she engages. Our first sight of Ann is at a sewing machine, wearing a 'washed out cotton frock and a big apron'. This image is reminiscent of women working in production lines in factories. Ann is set up here as the middle class version of this oppression.

When Ann says to Helen, who is noisily berating people who cause such oppression, 'I wish you'd go and lie down. Do like a dear' [148], Ann begs Helen to let matters rest. To confront those issues is too much bother for Ann. There is more grief in her life now than she is able to cope with, without taking on more worries. Ann's desire for life's unpleasant realities to 'lie down' is one way in which Bensusan explores the concept of correct female behaviour. As a character, Ann represents one kind of women whom the AFL were trying to convert, women who were tired and exploited, but too apathetic to do anything about it. She is one of those women in that class 'most difficult of all to get at "the women who take no interest at all" in Votes For Women'.[17] In using Ann to symbolise the cost of that indifference, Bensusan effectively questions the virtues of those women who seek refuge in traditionally acceptable female enterprise and ignore the women's movement.

Helen is introduced as 'a tall, buxom type, very handsome with a fine figure...young with good colour and clear complexion'. Much attention is paid to Helen's appearance. She is 'neatly dressed in tailor-made style, stiff collar, little tie, short pleated skirt, plain hat, simple but distinctly smart'. Interestingly, Bensusan goes on to explain that Helen is 'the type to be met with frequently in city offices, but young with good colour and clear complexion' [143]. This description sets Helen apart from the 'norm' (older and less conventionally attractive?), in a calculated manner for two reasons. Firstly, deliberately giving Helen these distinctions effectively shatters the perceived stereotype of the working woman of this period. Should this be regarded as a melodramatic ploy by Bensusan to romanticise the leading 'lady'? It was indeed a device to increase Helen's charm, but Bensusan meant it to instruct the audience that not all working women are grimy and downtrodden, with no other life options The politics of this tactic are obvious: suffragettes

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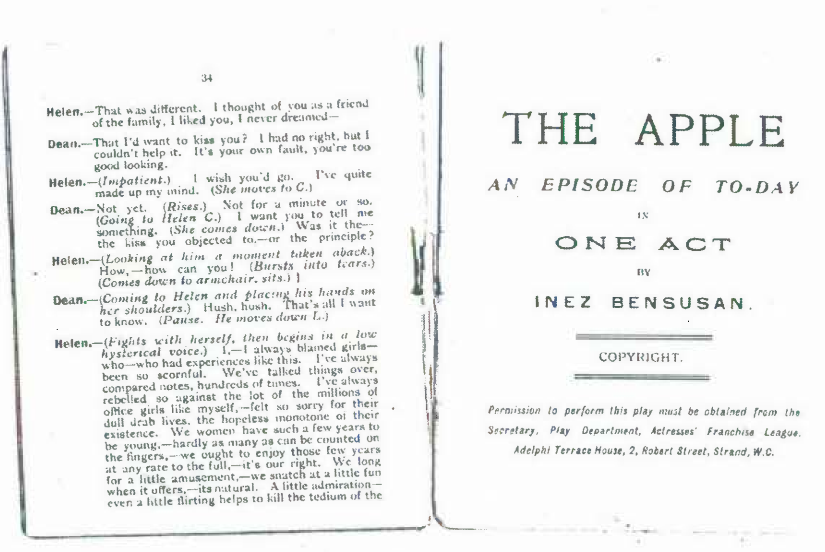
[17] Quoted in Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

are not the scruffy unfortunates that the popular press so often portrayed them to be. Secondly, this unusual representation of a working woman allows Bensusan to explore more fully women's motivations for participating in the work force. Making Helen obviously attractive lets the audience know that she has options with which office women were not normally credited (conservative views surmised that if women worked, it was because they could not marry). The drama with Nigel demonstrates the playing out of one of Helen's available options. Helen's flirtation with her life options during the course of the play provides an opportunity for Bensusan to explore various aspects of women's desire to alter their life conditions.

Cyril is 'a dapper conceited youth of 23', a 'sort of superior bank clerk type'. Bensusan had strong ideas about how Cyril should be presented. He is meant to be 'Very well dressed, rather overdressed in fact. His hair is shiny and sleek; he wears a large buttonhole, fawn doeskin gloves, smart socks and immaculate shoes' [147]. This visual image would have a clear meaning for an Edwardian audience, especially when such a character walks into a room where the furniture is 'very worn, giving the impression of poor gentlefolk trying to make a brave show'. Cyril is trying to move beyond the confines of his own class, and his pretentious wardrobe matches his behaviour. Nigel, on the other hand, is represented as being a rightful heir to what Cyril almost comically aspires. Nigel is 'a tall, good looking man', and stands 'quite composedly, as though knowing himself master of the situation'. His age is not actually stated, but other information reveals him as being significantly older than Helen.

Bensusan has drawn these two male characters so deliberately as an investment to enable a better appreciation of Helen's dilemma—what should she do? Nigel and Cyril operate as dramatic catalysts in that exploration. Bensusan could have chosen simply to have Helen and Ann discuss the men but in putting them on stage she heightens the complexities of the drama. Especially in comparison to Cyril's actions, and after being set up by Helen as a villain, Nigel is a very likeable character, surprising the audience with his pleasant appearance and manners. Nigel and Cyril continue to have shifting perceptions throughout the play, leading the audience through their own ambiguous feelings about

women and proper conduct. This dramatic device allows Bensusan to explore successfully as many arguments about this issue as possible.



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Helen.—That was different. I thought of you as a friend of the family, I liked you, I never dreamed—

Dean.—That I'd want to kiss you? I had no right, but I couldn't help it. It's your own fault, you're too good looking.

Helen.—(*Impatient.*) I wish you'd go. I've quite made up my mind. (*She moves to C.*)

Dean.—Not yet. (*Rises.*) Not for a minute or so. (*Going to Helen C.*) I want you to tell me something. (*She comes down.*) Was it the—the kiss you objected to,—or the principle?

Helen.—(*Looking at him a moment taken aback.*) How,—how can you! (*Bursts into tears.*) (*Comes down to armchair, sits.*)]

Dean.—(*Coming to Helen and placing his hands on her shoulders.*) Hush, hush. That's all I want to know. (*Pause. He moves down L.*)

Helen.—(*Fights with herself, then begins in a low hysterical voice.*) I,—I always blamed girls—who—who had experiences like this. I've always been so scornful. We've talked things over, compared notes, hundreds of times. I've always rebelled so against the lot of the millions of office girls like myself,—felt so sorry for their dull drab lives, the hopeless monotone of their existence. We women have such a few years to be young,—hardly as many as can be counted on the fingers,—we ought to enjoy those few years at any rate to the full,—it's our right. We long for a little amusement,—we snatch at a little fun when it offers,—its natural. A little admiration—even a little flirting helps to kill the tedium of the

THE APPLE

AN EPISODE OF TO-DAY

IN

ONE ACT

BY

INEZ BENSUSAN.

COPYRIGHT.

Permission to perform this play must be obtained from the Secretary, Play Department, Actresses' Franchise League, Adelphi Terrace House, 2, Robert Street, Strand, W.C.

Figure 8.3 *An extract from* The Apple *as it was originally published by the Actresses' Franchise League. Note the pocket or purse size, which characterised the series of plays published by the Play Department (FL).*

The fifth character, who never appears on stage but is nevertheless an important player, also operates as a catalyst to the dramatic action. Norah is the younger sister who works as a governess, who apparently earns so little that she does not have enough money for necessities, let alone luxuries. Ann pawns a beloved personal possession so that Norah can attend a ball, and it is this ball gown which is being made during the course of the play. Helen at first berates Ann for her self-sacrifice, but she does not answer when Ann asks 'You don't grudge her that, surely?' [143]. Amidst the seriousness of the dramatic issues being explored, Bensusan does not neglect to confront women and their access to pleasure, and what the costs and benefits of the pursuit that pleasure are.

The issues: the Nigel and Helen affair

The major exploration about female behaviour is conducted through Helen's relationship with Nigel. What the audience knows about Nigel before they actually meet him is quite substantial. Helen says, describing him, 'He's not awful at all...he's rather nice', and worries that she is 'cursed with some sort of attraction for that kind of man'. She tells Ann that 'he offered me anything, anything I wanted in the whole world...He is very generous, very thoughtful, very understanding... So concerned about my happiness...so anxious to lighten my burden' [146]. Despite his affront to Helen, Ann thinks Nigel 'a real dear! A trump I call him' [146]. Cyril is not so impressed, and resents his father's endorsement of Nigel: 'The Governor's all over him...I can't stand the man. Thinks a jolly sight too much of himself' [147]. Cyril being Cyril, the audience would be less inclined to believe him than his sisters.

When Nigel finally appears, Helen trembles with 'excitement' when he comes into the room, and starts to cry when she realises that her throwing a ruler at him earlier in the office had wounded him. What Nigel says about himself is also revealing. He placates Helen as she apologises for the injury saying 'Not at all. I deserved it' [152]. This is a significant moment of truth in the play, required not only for the forward movement of Nigel and Helen's relationship, but of the suffragette cause itself. Bensusan implies that liability must be admitted by both parties involved, otherwise no progress can be made. It does not matter who is at fault, men or women, but the problem must be acknowledged, and a willingness to change declared.

Unfortunately, the admission of fault on Nigel's part was not genuine. As the Nigel and Helen affair is played out, Bensusan explores concepts of trust and betrayal—elements which characterised the British suffrage movement at this time: the frustration of Government promises prompted the evolution of many suffragists into suffragettes.[18] Nigel's characterisation as a man not to be trusted gave Bensusan an opportunity to dramatise why and how women made the decision to move to militancy. This shift is

[18] See for example Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals*, London, 1977 [1931].

obvious in Helen's behaviour, and results in Nigel—whom the audience had heard so many good things about—suddenly becoming a villain.

Following the incident at the office, Nigel goes first to Helen's father and smooths things over, assuring him that a 'girl' like Helen 'needs occupation' because she is so high spirited. He then attempts to make amends with Helen. On learning of Nigel's interference, Helen says that it is freedom, not 'occupation' she wants. Nigel argues that he had already offered her that, and she had refused 'You thought it brutal of me. So it was'. Nigel nevertheless defends himself by claiming that his promise of entertainment, travel abroad, and the 'pretty things' of life are all innocent offerings, and blames society which reads them as otherwise. 'I'm not a villain in a melodrama', Nigel argues, 'I'm a reasonable human being' [152].

When Helen makes it clear that she is not willing to receive what Nigel wants to give her, he initially concedes to her righteousness, only to play his trump card soon after. Nigel reveals that he is to fund Cyril's upward mobility, and that Helen's 'cooperation' is desirable given those circumstances. This betrayal of trust is the turning point in the play. Helen shifts to a militant attitude, accusing Nigel of buying her silence. She threatens to reveal all to her father, believing that 'though I'll get all the blame, at least he'll see you as you really are'. These same sentiments inspired suffragettes to similar exposure tactics in their campaign for the vote by publicly denouncing those who opposed suffrage reform as villains. Nigel responds to Helen's threat of exposure with 'I have no wish to come between you and that conscience of yours. It's a pretty conscience. I admire it' [152].

It is this response which firmly casts him as a villain. Nigel is exactly the melodramatic villain he claims not to be. Helen recognises this when she responds to Nigel's question asking if he is going to be treated as an enemy with 'Do you think you deserve to be a—a friend?' Nigel says, 'Try me', but Helen shakes her head no, claiming moral victory. Helen reprimands herself, however, saying 'I always blamed girls—who—who had experiences like this. I've always been so scornful' [153]. Bensusan allows her character to make this observation, hopefully prompting the audience to a similar appraisal.

Although the ambiguity surrounding the sexual nature of Nigel and Helen's relationship creates effective dramatic tension, whether or not they actually did have sex is irrelevant. Bensusan's intention is to present an example of a woman who engaged in 'unacceptable' behaviour, and to try and manipulate the audience's response to that presentation. Helen claims that her romantic interlude has caused her to lose 'something that's best in her. Something she can *never get back*' (Bensusan's emphasis) [153]. Whether Helen means her virginity, or her reputation, or both, is not essential to Bensusan's main point: that women who indulge in non-traditional relationships are apt to lose the moral currency that measures their own economic worth. Her marital prospects potentially jeopardised by a sullied reputation, Helen has paid a high price for the pursuit of pleasure, much higher than Nigel's offended dignity. Further, in a society where double standards of morality more readily excuse man's marital infidelity than women's sexual (and other) needs, Helen's costs are substantially different from Nigel's.

Whether or not Nigel—as a symbol of the villainy which constantly eroded the suffrage cause—is worthy of feminist hatred is not decided during the course of the play. Helen's final decisions, like that of the audience's, occurs after the life of the play has drawn to a close. When Ann asks 'Who got the best of the argument, and Helen replies 'The Apple, of course', [154] the argument has reverted to condemning the visible culprit, the fool who everyone can recognise. Lurking beneath this condemnation, however, is the knowledge that laying blame on one person is not appropriate. Nigel and Cyril were initially set up as opposites, with Cyril clearly cast as the dapper villain. Nigel's emergence as the more devious usurper of women's rights is a deliberate ploy on Bensusan's part. This strategy argues that seemingly respectable members of society like Nigel (representing the force of government) do even more harm than buffoons such as Cyril. The Cyrils of the world can easily make their own enemies; it is the Nigels who require closer scrutiny and exposure, Bensusan warns. *The Apple* shows just how complicated feminist vigilance can be. The grim part of Bensusan's story is not the sexual harassment incident alone, but from the recognition that as long as men own the 'currency of the kiss', it is a dangerous enterprise for women to stretch their ideas of freedom.

Dramatising constraint: clothes as a symbol of oppression, emigration, and feminist desire

The final image of Helen 'sewing with tears streaming down her face' brings this examination to the next area of exploration: clothes as a symbol of constraints that women suffer under Victorian attitudes, still prominent in Edwardian times. Stowell notes that the world of women's fashion, usually paraded in society dramas of this period, offers no such refuge for the women in *The Apple*.[19] Bensusan's 'clothes incident' early in the play makes it explicit that women are as much entrapped by their clothing as they are by other social constraints.

Helen comes home to find that Ann is sewing a dress for their sister Norah, and that she has pawned a beloved piece of jewellery in order to purchase the fabric. Helen persuades Ann to remove her bodice, at the threat of ripping it off if she doesn't comply: 'I'll rip it off myself if you don't. It will take half the time my way' [145]. It is significant that when Ann does take off her blouse, she says to Helen 'Whatever nonsense are you talking now?' That 'nonsense' is Helen's ideas on emancipation, and these are expressed whilst Ann is disrobed—without her Victorian 'armour'—and therefore more vulnerable to the penetration of those ideas. During this dialogue, Helen pins the gown so expertly on Ann that she can't extricate herself when other characters enter. This entrapment is the central image of many in the play where clothes operate as symbols of women's containment.

Escaping from the confines of Victorian expectations was not an easy matter for English women in the early twentieth century. Emigration, usually to British colonies, was believed to be an option offering a greater concept of freedom to many women who were seeking change. Emigration—representing great change and possibilities for transformation—therefore became a symbol of feminist desire, closely linked with a desire to abandon the ties that bind. In *The Apple*, the expression of that desire is in conflict with its oppression symbolised by the bondage of restrictive clothing.

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[19] Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 48. Stowell reiterates this argument in Kaplan & Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: From Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 162-3.

While Helen is fitting the dress on Ann, she divulges that she is leaving London and emigrating to Canada with some girlfriends: 'Nothing will change my determination. I mean to go. I'm sick of this life of scrape and screw—this narrow hemmed-in existence. I've had enough of it' [145]. Helen says this while pinning Ann tightly into a party dress, constraining her. Helen warns 'Keep still, or the pins will stick in you'; suggesting that you can not move beyond those confines without pain [145]. Bensusan presents a dense argument here: in order to emigrate to another physical land or another 'continent of thought' where a greater freedom is imagined, then you must move beyond the prisons bordered by painful exit routes. Helen justifies her decision to do just that, and all through this speech she continues to fit the bodice to Ann. Dramaturgically, Ann's confinement represents Helen's alternative, that is, entrapment. Although Helen herself does not consider the consequence of her escape, Bensusan uses the dramatic action to point out the costs involved. Bensusan is concerned not only with the effect of Helen's departure on Ann, but with the suffrage movement itself neglecting to consider the plights of all women in its campaigns.

Ann's circumstances would only be exacerbated by Helen's departure, and Helen's continuing to pin Ann in during this conversation about her own desires—with no regard for Ann's—symbolises this. Bensusan has cleverly dramatised Helen's complicity in other women's oppression through the device of fitting the dress. The implication is that the selfish pursuit of dreams, for example emigrating and leaving your problems behind, is not a feminist solution at all if you leave caged women behind to deal with those same problems.[20] When Helen says 'I've got to do something. Canada's best', [146] the play's dramatic action questions that decision to leave. *The Apple*'s resolution is not without hope for the sisters. Helen's decision at the end of the play to abandon her desire to emigrate is not so tragic seen in this light. Perhaps her departure has only been postponed until a better time.

Ann's complicity in allowing herself to be so confined must also be taken into account. Through the clothing incident Bensusan has exposed that the terrible thing about

[20] Perhaps Bensusan herself may have been contemplating life again in Australia where women were enfranchised, and tackling similar philosophical questions herself.

women and oppression is that they so often do it to each other. Ann's compliance is scrutinised; her attempts to keep the peace are presented as actions of weakness. Ann tries to convince Helen not to go public with her shocking news. She explains away Nigel's 'untoward' behaviour (it was a *fatherly* kiss, she insists), and tries to persuade Helen that it is unnecessary to 'make Mother miserable, and upset us all by having to answer all sorts of questions about you' [147]. She strongly suggests that emigrating to Canada is an overreaction to the incident.

While Ann spurts these Victorian puritanisms, she is at the same time struggling to get out of her constricting bodice: 'Unpin me Ellie, I can't get out of the thing' [147]. The stage directions read 'Helen rouses herself and undoes the pins'. This provides one of Bensusan's clearest feminist messages of the play: that some women can not do it alone, and they need help to 'unpin' themselves. Bensusan is asking here for a feminist sisterhood with leadership that acknowledges differences, including the inability to help oneself. As Helen undoes the pins, she counts 'One, two, three, four, five! I'm so sorry. Five years to wait for a husband. I ought to have been more considerate' [147]. Read cynically, this could mean that Helen does not want to be told to consider others, and to compromise her own desires accordingly. Perhaps Helen's bitterness is responsible for this lack of care—after five years of compliant and proper female behaviour, of 'waiting', the only offer she has had was Nigel's.

Cyril has the final say on emigration as desire, presenting yet another dramatic image of imprisonment. He is 'thunderstruck' when Helen reveals that she has left her job and is emigrating to Canada: '...don't care let [father] keep my share from me, or there'll be trouble, worse, much worse, a scandal, do you here'. During all this, Cyril initially thinks that Helen is 'going dotty' and that the idea of emigrating is 'bunkum', 'a wildcat scheme' that is 'abominable' and 'selfish'. Helen responds strongly: 'Selfish? Because I'm trying to go straight? Trying to help myself. To fight my way?...what about my happiness? My future? My chances?' [151]. Cyril tells her that: 'Girls don't want chances. They only want husbands'. Helen again asserts her desire, and Cyril ridicules her one final time: 'Rights as an individual! Bosh! Twaddle! What you really want is a good hiding, and

bread and water for a week' [151]. The argument ends on this final image of imprisonment.

The image of bread and water, redolent of prison food, was a significant symbol for women in the suffrage movement. While *The Apple* was being performed many suffragettes, Bensusan's friends and colleagues amongst them, were being imprisoned for their suffragette activities. Many of these women went on hunger strikes and were eventually force fed. It is significant that Cyril, as a male, introduced this image of imprisonment. Bensusan draws the obvious parallel that when women express feminist desire, they will be punished. Cyril wishes this punishment on his sister, thinking that a 'good hiding' will break her spirit.

Feminist dramaturgy at play

Although these examples—the Nigel and Helen affair, clothes as a symbol of oppression, and emigration as an expression of feminist desire—are the most engaging explorations in the play, in its one act *The Apple* covers almost every imaginable feminist question of the day. Throwaway feminist observations are woven into the dramatic action at every opportunity, adding satirical clarity to the main arguments of the play. Helen raises issues including women and work, equality between men and women in access to and standards of education, and even the long history of women's oppression. Despite this, little attention has been paid to *how* Bensusan managed to express those ideas. Carole Hayman alone has commented directly on Bensusan's writing abilities, saying that *The Apple* is 'very well written with crisp dialogue and very clearly drawn characters'.[21] *The Apple*'s popularity was due in great part to the fact that it was a highly performable play—because it was so well written. Bensusan's treatment of thematic questions partly defines her dramatic writing skills. For example, unlike many 'propaganda' suffrage playwrights Bensusan presents both sides of any given argument, often offering no decisive resolution. The burden of decision, or at least the obligation for further debate, is placed directly on the audience.

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[21] Spender & Hayman, *op. cit.*, p. 42

This is seen in the offstage sister, Norah, who functions not only as a further example of how women are exploited in the workplace, but as a symbol of both hostility between women, and women's self-oppression. Norah's underpaid work as a governess, and her desire to have a better life, create the dramatic situation where she is off to a party in a dress that her sister has made a considerable sacrifice to pay for. Bensusan comments on women's self oppression, presenting them both as slaves to fashion and, ironically, producers of it. When Helen points out to Ann that Norah 'has more spare time than you', Ann only replies that 'the poor child is so tired after her day's work. I wouldn't be a nursery governess for anything' [143]. Helen is indignant at Ann's selflessness, both in funding and making the dress, when she herself is poor and overworked. Norah is 'not too tired to go to a party' yet too tired to make her own dress.

In defending her actions Ann arouses sympathy for Norah's situation, demonstrating Bensusan's balanced treatment of her thematic subjects. We learn that Norah has had to bargain for her evening off to attend the party, paying for it by rising early to compensate. Ann's defence of Norah allows Bensusan's critique of the women's profession of governess: 'the poor child—she had to wear something, and they pay her so badly where she is. She can't save a penny' [144]. Recognising that Norah, although selfish, is also exploited, Helen abandons criticising her sisters in favour of more general anger. She redirects her rage at her father who 'ought to pay for Norah's clothes', and the fact that women's economic security rests on the precarious shoulders of male generosity [144]. This also sets up the dramatic situation of 'hating Cyril', who absorbs the family's income with his need to be decently clad.

Through this example, in a relatively short dramatic space (the opening five minutes of the play), Bensusan has raised some complex issues about women and work, considered various aspects of these issues, and implied through juxtaposition that there are no easy answers. Yet the unease created is significant: because *The Apple* was performed not only at suffrage gatherings, but in more traditional theatre spaces in London, it is not unrealistic to expect that some of the audience members themselves were employers of governesses whom they may very well have similarly exploited. That is, perhaps audience

members could recognise themselves as 'off stage characters', Norah's employers, and therefore complicit in the dramatic action of the play. This is only one of many examples of feminist dramaturgy in action demonstrating Bensusan's dramatic talents.

Recent critical interpretations

In recent times *The Apple* has been more 'interpreted' than performed, and those interpretations are the subject of the following discussion. Some recent critical appraisals of *The Apple* have read and heard Bensusan's authorial voice—in particular its feminism—in ways that open those observations up for certain criticisms. In an attempt, however futile, to locate Bensusan's intended authorial voice, this examination takes issue with some of those readings.

Most critiques of *The Apple* focus on the singular theme of sexual harassment, an issue that continues to have lingering relevance for feminists. Spender says 'If the play were written today, perhaps it would have a different, and happier ending'.[22] Perhaps Spender assumes too much, which is exactly why this issue, more than any other in the play, takes critical precedence. Audiences today would have much trouble empathising with Helen's situation than with Ann's, hence the focus Helen's dilemma. The dramatic popularity of sexual harassment only partly accounts for the critical neglect of the wider issues raised in *The Apple*. Too much praise has been uncritically credited to Bensusan simply because she wrote on a subject of recognisable concern to feminists. A closer reading of *The Apple* reveals that Bensusan presented a far less convincing attack on the male perpetrators of sexual exploitation than many critics believe. While this handling may at first appear to discredit Bensusan's feminism—certainly, the ambiguities of response by the characters to the incident of sexual harassment makes for a better drama—it is this ambiguity which reveals a far more sophisticated response to the subject of sexual exploitation than previously credited.

Holledge claims that *The Apple* 'gives a vivid picture of the sexism inherent in middle-class life', but argues that it is 'weakened by the romanticism of Helen's

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[22] *Ibid*, p. 141.

relationship with Dean'.[23] A different interpretation of the play would read Helen's nebulous feelings for Nigel as both a strategy for heightening the dramatic conflict, and for exploring a broader spectrum of feminism that does not settle for black and white solutions. While I agree with Stowell that Bensusan 'is concerned to demonstrate women's oppression within a system constructed to protect male interests',[24] Helen's relationship with Nigel in no way romanticises that oppression, nor detracts from the exploration of women's exploitation. Making Helen vulnerable to her own decisions, as well as Nigel's, only serves to highlight the play's feminism.

In exploring that argument, it is important to note that Helen was an active and willing participant in her relationship with Nigel and not simply a victim. The impression is that until that afternoon's incident, Helen had enjoyed her flirtations, her outings, and all of her boss's offers. She was after all going 'around' with him—a single woman accompanying a married man. Even though Nigel was a family friend, it was still questionable behaviour. It is possible Helen actually felt strongly for Nigel, and that she was independent of spirit enough to engage in this dallying. It was only when things became complicated—did she fall in love?—that the consequences of her feelings became obvious: she would be a 'marked' woman. If this interpretation is plausible, then their relationship and all its subsequent turns throughout the play must be viewed in a different light.

It seems that Helen was just as tortured by the injustice of the constraints on female behaviour as she was by her boss's abuse of his power to manipulate her in this situation. Helen showed affection towards Nigel (about his injury), and only became disdainful when the economic ramifications of the situation bore down on her. Further, if Helen's primary concern (and indeed the primary concern of the play) was sexual harassment, then the solution offered was a meek one: English bosses do not have a monopoly on sexual exploitation, as Helen would surely have recognised. Helen was running away from more than Nigel, she was running away from the yet to be fully

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[23] Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*, London, 1981.
[24] Stowell, *op. cit.* p. 50.

realised consequences of her own behaviour. This is perhaps another reason why Bensusan hindered Helen's escape. By staying Helen may learn that things are not as bad as she thinks, and that her 'immoral' behaviour is possibly a viable alternative to marriage. The 'kind of girl' who would pack her bags and emigrate to Canada with her girlfriends may easily be the 'kind of girl' who would seriously consider such a life option.

Stowell's thesis argues that the play's central concern is the sexual harassment incident linked to economic exploitation.[25] Her entire analysis of *The Apple* flounders if, as the play suggests, Helen was willingly involved with Nigel, and that she was not a naive innocent maliciously wronged. Unlike Bensusan, Stowell divides the scenario too neatly into good and evil, which requires the innocence of Helen to enact her exploitation. Stowell's interpretation disempowers Helen, reverting her to the status of victim, which was not congruent with Bensusan's feminist agenda. Helen's conflict with Nigel involved much more than her offence at his sexual liberties, and it was not the only significant feminist dilemma in *The Apple*. In a play about women and work, life opportunities, and feminist desire, the kiss (and the ensuing threat) is only one incident among many that serve to explore Bensusan's polished treatise about what constitutes proper female behaviour.

Helen does not want 'your decent husband', and she makes that clear. She wants 'a little pleasure, a glimpse of life, a taste of the joy of living...my rights as an individual' [151]. Stowell maintains that Helen is seeking 'freedom from the state of affairs that oppresses her with conventional (sexualised) expectations of behaviour'.[26] Stowell reads 'freedom' as Helen's expressed and frustrated travel plans, but perhaps Helen's (and Bensusan's) idea of freedom has been misread. Consequently the subtle claims of Edwardian feminists, as proposed in the play, have also been misunderstood. Although it was risky to defend female sexual promiscuity in the suffrage era, it was advocated by certain groups of feminists. It is exactly that choice which Helen is confronted with and frightened by in *The Apple*. Helen did *not* say she did not want a husband: she just did not want a 'decent' one. Nigel was not 'decent'. It is possible that, until his final betrayal where

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[25] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

he virtually blackmailed her, that Helen really wanted Nigel. She was stopped by the self-imposition of her own concepts of proper female behaviour, the very restrictions of which had ironically driven her to rebellion in the first place.

Hirshfield decides, in her analysis of *The Apple*, that '[c]learly Miss Bensusan's heroine is no militant. Rather she espouses views with which the mainstream of suffragists would have been quite comfortable with'.[27] Can we be so certain about either of these claims? The wide popularity of *The Apple*, which extended beyond the circles of AFL performances, implies that Hirshfield's reading of the play's lack of offensiveness is deserved. But Edwardian audiences did not mind being shocked and in the tradition of 'drama of ideas' they practically expected it. Helen may not have been militant at the play's opening, but it is not known what effects the events of the drama had on her, or the audience. Helen's feminist desires are not 'dead'. Just as Helen's own life would be informed by the lessons learnt during the play, so too could a suffragist audience leave a performance of *The Apple* similarly equipped to take on tougher challenges—committed to change after having been confronted with the disappointments of their feminist achievements so far. As long as women imagine a better future without oppression, *The Apple* could not be considered an irrelevant play.

Edwardian audiences were no strangers to the cautionary tale, and would have been well prepared to receive Bensusan's own warnings in *The Apple*. During the play, Helen said to Ann, who had just offered to make her a cup of tea at the end of a hard day: 'You're worked to death as it is...It's bad enough the way the others make use of you, but I'm hanged if I'll allow it' [143]. Ultimately, this is the most decisive feminist comment of the play (and one that Bensusan endorsed and recommended): that all people must make the decision not to allow exploitation to happen—not to participate in it, nor to condone it. The feminist rights Bensusan advocated in *The Apple* which were of monumental concern to the women's movement during the suffrage period, and still have considerable resonances today. Overworked as it is by recent feminist dramatic criticism which begs to be

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[27] Hirshfield, 'The Actresses' Franchise League and the Campaign for Women's Suffrage', *Theatre Research International*, vol 10, no 2, 1985, p. 137.

challenged in production, and acknow edging the beautifully executed dramatic precision of Bensusan's writing, *The Apple* awaits fresh interpretations through new productions.

NOBODY'S SWEETHEART

Nobody's Sweetheart is a very diffe ent play from *The Apple* and, not having been performed under the auspices of the AFL, came to life in dissimilar circumstances. This time Bensusan tested her dramatic presentation of feminist ideas via the medium of a 'fisher-folk-play', and through another theatrical organisation playing to very different audiences. The response to *Nobody's Sweetheart* was hardly overwhelming, which perhaps accounts for its absence from theatre history to date. This account provides the first feminist critique of the play, and introduces it to readers with specific intentions. Firstly, *Nobody's Sweetheart* provides an opportunity to examine the work of a suffrage playwright operating in the larger London theatre world, and to assess how feminist ideas were disseminated through theatres that were not controlled by feminist practitioners and to audiences who were not necessarily concerned with the women's movement. Secondly, *Nobody's Sweetheart* is a testament to Bensusan's development as a playwright. On one level a seemingly innocent folk play, *Nobody's Sweetheart* reveals itself as a sophisticated experiment in feminist fable writing. The dramatic enactment of that fable mythologises the feminist quest which characterised the suffrage period.

Set in the interior of a peasant cottage in a Brittany fishing village, this is a play about discovering and deploying courage. *Nobody's Sweetheart* opens with Margot, the heroine, hesitantly giving her blessing for Yvonne to marry her beloved younger brother and only living relative, Jean. Margot, orphaned at fifteen, has devoted her life to his upbringing, even sacrificing her one love, Hervé (presumed long dead), to this cause. A disaster strikes in the form of a storm, and a mission to rescue a passing vessel is formed by the village men. As Jean is nowhere to be found, Margot disguises herself and secretly takes Jean place in the rescue boat. Jean returns during the rescue and realises her deception. Mission accomplished, the rescuers return whereupon Margot's identity is

discovered, and her bravery congratulated and celebrated. One of the victims Margot saved was Hervé. The lovers are reunited, concluding the action.

With seven female and four male cast members, *Nobody's Sweetheart* is already unusual for a period in theatre history that was not used to women dominating the stage. That these women were peasant women only subverts theatrical tradition even further. The working classes were not the usual subject matter of West End 'serious' drama, especially not in leading roles. Although the AFL repertoire includes some similarly contentious examples,[28] it was still a brave move for a new playwright (hoping for financial success) to challenge theatrical tradition so strongly. Perhaps this is why she chose the company of the Oncomers' Society to do so, a theatre company committed to promoting new British theatre, and with whom Bensusan enjoyed a close association.

Performance history and contemporary reception

Nobody's Sweetheart was produced in May 1911. There are several theatres named or approved on the application for the licence issued by Lord Chamberlain's office: the Little, John St, and the Adelphi. This at least indicates that Bensusan had long-term or larger plans for *Nobody's Sweetheart* (even if they did not eventuate). The only records of performance that remain are those from the Oncomers' Society's matinee performance on 29 May 1911. Three other plays were performed on this same program, directed by Benedict Butler. The following reviews of that performance provide some indication of how *Nobody's Sweetheart* was received.

First to *The Era*, which begins the review of all four plays negatively: 'In every representation of the Oncomers' Society, the program assures us, the cast consists exclusively of professional players. That fact, however, could not make the four one-act plays presented at the Little Theatre on Monday afternoon particularly entertaining'.[29] Dealing with the program chronologically, by the time the reviewer had reached *Nobody's*

[28] See for example Evelyn Glover's *A Chat With Mrs Chicky*, in which a char woman converts her anti-suffragist mistress.
[29] Anonymous review, *The Era*, 3 June 1911, p. 12.

THE ONCOMERS' SOCIETY.

Under the Patronage of

H. B. IRVING, Esq. ; CHARLES HAWTREY, Esq. ; GERALD DU MAURIER, Esq. ; LEWIS WALLER, Esq. ; Miss DECIMA MOORE ; F. R. BENSON, Esq. ; SIDNEY VALENTINE, Esq.

Matinee—Monday, May 29th, 1911, at 2.30 p.m.

"The Blind God,"

BY

OLIVE LETHBRIDGE and GERALD FITZGERALD.

Lady Beatrice Ethelborough		INA ROYLE
Iris Westerby	(Her Cousin)	CICELY BARCHAM
Captain Jack Denvers		RICHARD E. GREENE
A Servant		ETHEL TYLER

SCENE—A Private Sitting Room in an Hotel in Monte Carlo.

Produced by RICHARD E. GREENE.

"For One Night Only,"

BY

GLADYS B. STERN.

Mrs. Venables	Of the "Venables A1 Touring Pantomime Co."	MILDRED ORME
"Minx"		INA ROYLE
"Pert"		GRACE RICHARDSON
"The Midget"		WINIFRED LAWRENCE
"Sorry"		SIBYL MAURISSE (By kind permission of Sir Herbert Tree)
"Don Juan"		CHARLES ROBERTS

SCENE—Ladies' Dressing Room in The Easton Royal Theatre.

TIME—7.30. The Present.

Produced by MARA MALTBY.

"Nobody's Sweetheart,"

BY

INEZ BENSUSAN.

Margot Caillac		MAY SAKER (By kind permission of Mr. F. C. Whitney)
Jean Caillac	(Her Brother)	PERCY CRAWFORD
Marie	(An Old Woman)	E. ANTON LAING
Yvonne		KATHERINE STUART
Jacqueline	(Breton Peasant Girls)	EVELYN CECIL
Jeanette		EILEEN SAVAGE
Blanche		DOROTHES TANQUERAY
Eustace	(An Old Man)	CYRIL ASHFORD
Étienne	(A Fisherman)	FRANC STONEY (By kind permission of Mr. Charles Hawtrey)
Hervé Dorrien		RICHARD E. GREENE

Peasant Girls:—Constantia Brookes, Winifred Laurence, Urania Keene, Clarice Laurence, and Aithna Gover.

SCENE—Interior of a Peasant's Cottage in a Breton Fishing Village.

The Curtain will be lowered during the progress of the Play to mark the lapse of an hour.

Produced by BENEDICT BUTLER.

"What some Men don't know,"

BY

H. F. MALTBY.

Alf	EDMUND KENNEDY
Garge	WYN WEAVER
'Erb	ARTHUR E. HOLLAND
A Lady	NELL DU MAURIER

SCENE—A Country Road. Night.

STAGE MANAGER ... ... EDMUND KENNEDY.

In every representation of "The Oncomers' Society" the Cast consists exclusively of Professional Players

Secretary to "The Oncomers' Society" (to whom all communications should be addressed), Miss MARA MALTBY, 28, Claverton Street, S.W.

G. Harmsworth & Co., Printers, 148, Drury Lane, London.

Figure 8.4 *Program from the Oncomers' Society May 1911 production of* Nobody's Sweetheart *(MM).*

Sweetheart, third in line, any tolerance had already been exhausted. Aside from misreading the motivations for Margot's courage, claiming that she joined the rescue mission to 'avoid the possibility of [Jean] being branded a coward', the action of the play is fairly summarised. Criticism is strongly directed at the play's conclusion which relies on the coincidence of Hervé being '[i]ncredibly enough among the crew of the stranded vessel'. Although two of the actors receive tokenistic compliments for the execution of their performance, this in no way counters the negative tone of the review and aspersions cast on the play. The review concludes with the single comment on production: '[t]here was a good deal of unnecessary clatter and din during the performance'.

Published two days before *The Era*'s, *The Stage* review interestingly opens with the similar criticism that there 'was altogether too much noise and shouting in *Nobody's Sweetheart*'.[30] Overall, this is a more critical and informative review, at least offering some structural advice: 'Miss Inez Bensusan, has yet to learn that excitement and tension become rather less than effective when too long drawn out'. The reviewer does not consider that this may have been a production rather than a writing problem.

The Stage review benefits from a different understanding of the characters than that expressed in *The Era*. For example, whereas *The Era* review describes Margot as nobody's sweetheart because she had 'many years before received tidings that her lover...had been lost at sea', *The Stage* review explains Margot's single status as a matter of choice: 'she had dismissed the only man she could ever love'. Margot's subjectivity is further recognised when this reviewer acknowledges that her act of courage was inspired by personal as well as selfless motives, saying she participated in the rescue 'to save the honour of *her* name' (my emphasis), as well as Jean's.

The review goes on to comment at length about the quality of the acting, offering advice to improve the reception of the play: 'Miss Katharine Stuart as Yvonne was acceptable in a by no means easy part, but rather inclined to deliver her lines in too much of a monotone. Miss E Anton Laing as Marie, an old women, would have been more

[30] Anonymous review, *The Stage*, 1 June 191 , p. 18.

successful had she exercised more restraint in voice and gesture'.[31] It ends with the final comment that '[t]here are the makings of a good variety sketch in *Nobody's Sweetheart*, but it would need drastic cutting and alterations regards superfluous dialogue, length of cast, and "noise" '. Theatre critics of this time, especially those writing for the mainstream press, had definite ideas about what theatre was and should be. For example, on this same program as *Nobody's Sweetheart* was a play by H F Maltby called *What some Men Don't Know*. *The Stage* critic said that this play was about the defeat of three working men by a lady cyclist 'would do better at a suffragist matinee'. This is quite revealing about the audience who attended the Little Theatre, implying they were not interested in such theatrical fare. This perhaps partly explains the lukewarm critical reaction to *Nobody's Sweetheart*.

Why was the noise in *Nobody's Sweetheart* so offensive? Why did Bensusan choose to create her theatrical storm in a village rather than a London drawing room? These are theatrical choices that contribute to Bensusan's definition as a feminist playwright, and ones which may well have violated the theatrical sensibilities of the audience as well as the reviewers of *Nobody's Sweetheart*'s matinee performance. This reading of *Nobody's Sweetheart* explores the play's feminism, which may or may not have reached its 1911 audience, because it is invaluable as a text which both documents the evolution of Edwardian feminism, but also the use of theatre as a political tool by suffragettes.

Love and marriage under feminist dramatic scrutiny

Love and marriage were important concerns for almost all women during this period, and of particular interest to feminists who were raising substantial criticisms about women's oppression. *Nobody's Sweetheart* takes that subject as a major theme, with Bensusan's critique of marriage as an institution opening the play. The newly married Jaqueline opens the play with: 'I tell you I'm very happy, and I can't do better than advise you all to follow

[31] *Ibid.*

my good example' [2].[32] A context of happiness has been set up creating a dramatic situation that demands to be affirmed or denied. Wise old Marie reminds Jaquie that she is 'only the bride of the month' [2], and that this explains her uncritical state of happiness.

This dialogue takes place during a scene of economic production where the women are mending fishing nets. It is in these 'factory' circumstances of the domestic sphere (recalling the play's interior cottage setting), that Bensusan explores these arguments, making a strong metaphor for marriage as an economic trade.[33] This economic analogy is further underlined by when Marie points out that 'husbands are all very well *at first* (Bensusan's emphasis), but don't forget that after the first good haul, you've got to expect your net a bit emptier next time you draw it in' [2]. This warning is kindly offered by Marie to prepare the girls for what she perceives to be the inevitable disappointments of marriage. Jaqueline thinks Marie unkind for trying to shake her faith in marriage, and questions her 'solemn warning' [2] that when a girl marries, she has played her trump economic card. What is interesting about these exchanges is that Bensusan is not arguing against marriage, but rather that women need to 'beware of husbands' who will disappoint them with their unreal romantic expectations of married life.

Bensusan continues the argument against marriage where women are considered as economic property through a small satire which reverses traditional marriage negations. Instead of the normal situation of the father giving his permission for 'his' daughter to marry, it is Margot who treats her brother Jean as 'her' property. Margot, in this usurpation, has the right to negotiate economically. For example, she has 'promised' Jean to Yvonne, but prolongs the exchange of 'goods', reluctant to relinquish ownership in the event of a better bargain. Later Yvonne asks, contemplating her future marriage, 'You aren't sorry that he's going to belong to me?' and Margot, who has now completed negotiations, retorts with a reverse of the old adage that she'll be gaining a 'little girl', not losing her 'little boy' [5]. This dramatic rendering by Bensusan of the 'goods and chattels' landscape of marriage provides no endorsement of the institution. In considering another terrain, the

[32] This and all subsequent citations refer to the unpublished manuscript of *Nobody's Sweetheart* held in the Lord Chamberlain's Collection (BL).
[33] This idea was particularly endorsed by Cicely Hamilton, whose *Marriage as a Trade* was widely read.

option of spinsterhood is raised with the inevitable discussion of 'old maids'. Bensusan, single all her life, was on the verge of turning forty when *Nobody's Sweetheart* was first was performed. In an era when the life expectancy of women was not much longer than 50 years, the play in this sense can be read as a poignant personal exploration of life choices already made. Those choices are explored in the text, and receive a balanced treatment.

Wise Marie sets the scene, saying: 'I'm not for any single one among you to be an old maid' [2] yet she does warn the young girls about the costs of marriage. The next mention of that usually ridiculed and pitied figure, the old maid, is when Margot, insisting on her privacy about a secret sweetheart and lost lover, rises and says: 'Ssh...you're talking rubbish...I'm cut out for an old maid' [4]. Margot's following soliloquy could almost be called 'The Lament of the Old Maid':

> How happy they are—sweethearts yesterday; brides today; wives and mothers tomorrow. Promise for all their young lives, promise of manifold joys for them all! Hearths of their own—The boys of their hearts beside them, and children to play at their feet—promise for all of them—none for me [4].

'All their young lives' is a significant phrase. Bensusan's description implies that a woman's joys and gifts of life cease after the obligations of her child-bearing years have been fulfilled. Returning to the concept of marriage as economic trade, it is at this point in her life that a woman's market value rapidly depreciates. In this soliloquy Bensusan has mapped out the comforts and patterns of traditional heterosexual love as it was manifested in the early years of this century. but what she is also cleverly doing is throwing the lot of an 'old maid' into relief, asking if it is really so bad a life option. Because she had been trading in a different currency all along, a childless and unmarried woman would not necessarily experience the same sudden and vicious deterioration of her worth. Further, with the ironic lament of 'the boys of their heart beside them' the audience is reminded that Jean is nowhere to be seen, and that Hervé is mysteriously long gone.

From such a distance, these discussions about life as a single woman may not appear to be noteworthy examples of feminist debate, but any story that explores alternatives to the perceived confines of marriage must be recognised as feminist

enterprise. Within the boundaries of heterosexual possibilities, to even question marriage's positive value—let alone its worth as an institution—was an extremely subversive act for Edwardian feminists. *Nobody's Sweetheart* does just that. Having set up in Margot's first monologue a suspicion that being married for the sake of it may not be worth it, Margot's subsequent monologues chart her developing feminist consciousness which confirm that supposition. That consciousness does not reject heterosexual relationships, or even marriage, but argues for change. Unlike *The Apple*, *Nobody's Sweetheart* offers some feminist solutions for change. In order to reap the benefits of a new consciousness, Bensusan argues, a journey that will transform all its participants is required.

A feminist quest drama

Bensusan's solutions are not offered didactically, but rather, through a revelatory tour de force of the female psyche (via Margot's dilemma), and are achieved in dramatic terms through Margot's character development. Through a series of interior monologues which chronicle Margot's shifting individuality, Bensusan presents an intriguing model of the feminist quest for change. As Margot is transformed by her own growing self-realisation, so too is the audience requested to participate in that journey. The first stage of that quest is an examination of the nature of male/female love through the interrelationships of Margot, Jean, Yvonne and Hervé. What throws all of these relationships into turmoil—and dramatic relief—is the play's storm.

Superficially the storm appears to be nothing more than a dramatic contrivance to change the course of the dramatic action, focussing attention away from the women and to their gossiping. In fact, it is the women's talk that brought about the forward movement of the action, because that talk creates the 'storm'. It is their very seething conversations, full of dark innuendos, deep secrets, denials, warnings, and hollow flattery which actuates the turbulence in the air. In this sense the women's talk takes on physical qualities, creating disturbances that change the weather. After conflicting exchanges about men, love, and marriage, Marie calls a halt to the conversation and moves to look outside. She declares: 'Sakes alive! how dark it's got; the sea and the sky look as if they're scowling at one

another—it'll be a miracle if we don't have a most terrible storm' [4]. This same kind of storm, she implies, would result if the darkness of their conversations escaped the confines of the cottage. It becomes apparent that their turbulent exchanges do indeed escape and cause the storm to erupt.

From this point the storm drives the dramatic action of the play, initiating Margot's feminist quest. Except for Margot and Yvonne, all the women leave the cottage to prepare for the tragedy. Their subsequent discussion reveals the intensity of Margot and Jean's relationship. While they wait for Jean to arrive home, Yvonne pleads with Margot not to allow him to join the rescue mission: 'Jean is too young, he is too delicate' [9], but Margot hushes her, and insists that Jean will fulfil his manly duties. Margot further tells Yvonne of her great love for Jean, and in this 'lesson' to the younger woman, she in fact sets up the obstacles to the achievement of her own quest. Here Margot outlines her own greatest fear, the force of nature that she believes stole her love—the ocean.

> Do you hear those waves? Do you know the meaning of their fury? Do you think they will spare anybody? Do they care whether they seize the loved or the loathed? It is all the same to them...somebody's sweetheart will be missing before another day comes to strengthen our hopes...Every time I hear that thundering roll of the breakers I know it means hours of heartache for somebody [8].

Margot has set up the ocean up as an enemy, one which must be confronted before her quest is over.

Margot sends Yvonne home to her grandmother as Etienne, an elderly fisherman, arrives seeking Jean to man the lifeboat. Margot asks 'Why do you come to me?' [8], soon realising that they are unable to locate Jean. This is the turning point in the play that initiates Margot's quest, because she realises that she is both capable and willing to take Jean's place. Before Yvonne left she posed a dramatic question of the play in asking Margot 'Then you will let him go?' The surface issue is of course the rescue, but it is the symbolic abandonment of Jean which is mandatory in order for Margot to initiate her own quest.

Confronting the 'storm' of Margot's oppression

Though she still refers to him as 'my little boy' Jean is eighteen and Margot is 28 [5]. Margot speaks about Jean in very sexual and possessive terms, with Bensusan implying that this is an absurd and dangerous situation. Earlier, Margot had used Jean as a legitimate excuse for her not having a sweetheart: 'I'm the mother of quite a big boy'. She is reminded that she is not Jean's mother but his sister, and concedes this point in a matronly manner, with a swift sidekick to Yvonne, who was at that point still seeking Margot's approval to marry: 'But I'm old enough to be his mother, little one—and he knows it, and like a dutiful boy, he always does what I tell him' [4]. The first lesson that Margot must learn before she can be successful in her quest, is the lesson that Jean is a man and not a boy. Granting permission for him to marry achieved this realisation, but the shock of that recognition was a contributing element to the brewing of the storm.

When Margot replies to Yvonne's question about whether Jean will love her as much as he loves his sister, saying: 'A man's love for his sister is nothing compared with his love for his wife' [5], this is a significant moment of character development. Margot acknowledges she is no 'real' competition, especially sexually. She feels this loss strongly, but makes a positive recovery. Her determination to change is fired by finally accepting the paucity of the selfless love for which women are famous, and wanting to make amends. Earlier in the play she had explained her selflessness in rejecting Hervé: 'He wanted to marry me and take me away to foreign parts, but this cottage and the farm on the hill were to be Jean's some day, and I could not rob my brother of his birthright, not even for the sake of the man I loved' [7].

This is reminiscent of criticisms levelled in *The Apple*, where Bensusan questions the superior role of and sacrifices made for male children in families as opposed to the recognition and acknowledgment of female interests. The difference in *Nobody's Sweetheart* is that Bensusan has twisted the thrust of that criticism to face towards women who themselves condone such behaviour. In *The Apple* Bensusan offered some excuses for the operations of sexism, for example, that gendered social conditioning produced historical behaviour such as obedience to parents and the privileging of male siblings.

Nobody's Sweetheart makes no such allowances. Bensusan has 'killed' the parents, the 'fathers' of righteousness and the traditional perpetrators of such injustice. Yet even when ostensibly free of those chains, women like Margot behave according to those patriarchal confines. The mirror that Bensusan holds up for Margot to mark her own folly is meant also to reflect harshly on women sitting in the audience who behave in the same manner.

How significant is it that Margot had to venture beyond the confines of her home and into the dangers of the 'real' world to be successful in her quest? There is more involved in this journey than a simple excursion beyond the confines of domesticity. In *Nobody's Sweetheart*, the 'real' world of male adventure versus the 'unreal' world of the environment of women dramatises the Victorian ideology of separate spheres. Bensusan debunks this binary opposition by suggesting that the 'real' world is in fact the other, private world of women, and it is in this psychological space that change needs to occur.

This idea privileging the importance of the inner world is underlined by the play's dramatic action, where Margot's transformation initially occurs in her own home, and was expressed through an interior monologue. Those decisions were informed, however, by events in the 'other' world. Margot's journey to deal with events in that other world signifies that women must confront issues in the wider world which affect the environment of their own worlds. Read simply, Bensusan is suggesting that to even control their own homes, and be empowered in their own marriages, women must engage in political reform. Just as betrayals of promised justice forced many women to militancy in the suffrage movement, Margot's similar realisation of her own oppression encouraged her to take issue with forces with which she had been long terrified. In this sense, *Nobody's Sweetheart* makes an analogy between Margot's personal quests, and the plight of Edwardian feminists. Once Margot had recognised her hopelessness, she became determined to rectify the situation. Firstly, she acknowledges that her release of Hervé had been willing, and that her clinging to Jean was unnatural. Secondly, she ventured into the 'stormy' world and fought for her rights. Those rights were nothing more than the freedom to control her own space, physical (the home) and spiritual (her heart), but they were nevertheless vital feminist concerns.

Bensusan argues that even if women have to abandon traditional female behaviour, and fight like and with men to achieve change, they must and will. *Nobody's Sweetheart* can on one hand be considered to offer a moderate feminist conclusion which sees the return of women from the battle to the safety of the home. On the other hand, Bensusan implies that the territorial rules of the separate spheres have been irrevocably challenged. Hervé has been sent away, sought again, and brought back—all on Margot's own (shifting) terms, to a space that she now rightfully controls.

What are the obstacles in Margot's feminist quest? In *Nobody's Sweetheart*, Bensusan posits that the largest obstacle oppressing women is their own definition of love. This oppression is symbolised in the play by the storm, which is why Margot confronts it. Adrienne Rich, like Bensusan, sees obsessive love as an enemy of feminism. Rich discusses some of the ways she considers that women destroy themselves, presenting a thesis of 'quadruple poison' which includes self-trivialisation, horizontal hostility (contempt for women), and misplaced compassion (for those who oppress women). Most damaging is female addiction 'to "Love"—to the idea of a selfless, sacrificial love as somehow redemptive...to male approval: as long as you can find a man to vouch for you, sexually or intellectually...your existence [is] vindicated, whatever the price you pay'.[34] *Nobody's Sweetheart* is about exactly that: the price women pay to love. It is an examination of the poverty that romantic love and marriage means for women in the market economy of the early twentieth century. It could be argued that Margot is performing the ultimate act of stupid female self-sacrifice in covering for Jean on the rescue mission, but her growing, demonstrable anger—at herself and at the storm—signifies a shift away from such behaviour. She abandons an addiction to others for an investment in herself, thus avoiding the oppressive poison articulated by Rich.

What light does the play's closure throw on Bensusan's and Rich's thesis about women and self-oppression? Even though the happy ending of *Nobody's Sweetheart* seemingly fulfils the paradigm of romantic love so criticised by Bensusan, Margot has in fact subverted its oppressiveness. Despite her reuniting with Hervé, Margot is still

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[34] Adrienne Rich, *On Lies Secrets and Silences: Selected Prose 1966-78*, London, 1980, p. 122.

'nobody's sweetheart', because she has cleansed herself in the storm of her addiction to love. Instead, her love was realised in a mature fashion (if melodramatically contrived by an enormous coincidence). It was not until Margot had shrugged off the oppression of her non-feminist behaviour that was she ready for a more mature, mutually beneficial love.

Although Bensusan still frames marriage as a 'reward', in *Nobody's Sweetheart* it is not an economic bounty controlled by men. Marriage as an institution, one that women have actively pursued and defined the terms of, is presented as desirable and not incongruous with feminist agendas. Bensusan argues that women should meet the challenges of marriage on an equal footing with men, coming to the situation/institution with equivalent gifts and strengths, and equally deserving of profit. Margot 'caught' her man, but not in the kind of net she was busy mending in the opening scene of the play. An antiquated tool, there were too many holes in that net for it to work successfully for a new woman who had abandoned traditional thought. Margot's successful quest operates as an inspiration to all women to control their own destinies.

The feminist heroine

Given the violence of the suffrage campaign in 1911, *Nobody's Sweetheart*, with its discussions of courage and commitment, could be read as a call to militancy. Bearing this intention in mind, Margot emerges as a deliberately created feminist heroine. Unlike *The Apple*, *Nobody's Sweetheart* offers the female lead as an inspirational role model for women. Margot's bravery was easy for her to locate. She simply claimed her inheritance, calling on her Caillac ancestry with 'the blood of generations of brave men' in it, taking for herself what was traditionally allocated to men [11]. During Margot's second monologue, she comes to see the ocean as competition, something which needs to be defeated: 'Why not? if I wished—if I dared' [12]. Margot takes on her own dare, framing the decision in battle terms and using language which gives the decision a sexual energy; for example calling the ocean 'thief, traitress, murderess' [11]. In Margot's definition of herself as a warrior, Bensusan has set up the scenario for her to emerge—if victorious in her quest—as a heroine. The other characters contribute to this profile.

Eustace expresses surprise when he learns that Jean was not on the boat, because he swears there was a 'Caillac' on board: 'You can't deceive me', he says. But he was deceived because, like everyone else, he had underestimated Margot. Acknowledging this mistake, everyone starts talking about Margot in glowing terms. Marie says, 'Margot has a fine arm, she can row like a man', arguing that she will surely survive [15]. Pushing the point even further, another character comments 'Aye, and as deft at the oar as she is at the spinning wheel'. Margot, in her absence and presumed death, enjoys this shifting subjectivity. Although the characters (and perhaps also the audience), are in two minds about Margot's actions, Marie reminds everybody that God is on the side of the courageous: 'The Lord don't desert such as her in the hour of need' [15]. After the reluctant acceptance of her heroic actions, Margot is allowed to return from her quest. This return follows a 'long scream of pleasure' from offstage. The first glimpse of Margot is of her in a melodramatic pose: Hervé enters 'with Margot lying wet and inanimate in his arms. He kneels down centre stage with her...her cap falls off, revealing her face and fallen hair' [17]. Yet it soon becomes apparent that it was Margot who had saved Hervé. Successful and safely home, the other characters now freely endorse Margot's bravery. No censorship of 'the bravest among women' is offered whatsoever.

When there is some doubt expressed about Margot's health, she replies that she will be 'well tomorrow when the sun shines again' [17]. Framing that question on a larger scale, the real inquiry is whether or not the cost of the suffrage struggle has been too damaging for women, or in other words, can the feminist journey be survived? Margot, 'ill with happiness', proves that it can be. As a slow curtain descends, Margot's quest completed, her reward is to be in Hervé's arms. Definitely somebody's sweetheart, and a New Woman heroine as well, Margot's success implies that women can have it all. A feminist fable, *Nobody's Sweetheart* is a tale of woman's sphere and the transgressions of limitations. Like all fables, its morality resonates in the larger world.

Edwardian subversions of gender and duty

Moving away from the concept of the play as a feminist quest drama, *Nobody's Sweetheart* deals with many more issues of concern and interest to Bensusan's contemporaries. The play offers, for example, some beguiling observations on manhood. Jean's manhood is one example of how Bensusan explores gendered behaviour in Edwardian society, demonstrating that men as well as women need to be reconstructed to realise a different future.

On the surface, Jean is a 'man' as his social circumstances expect him to be. When Jean says 'I know my duty as a sailor and a man', the question begging is why did he not fulfil those duties? Further, who defines those subjectivities which allocate men and women to separate spheres, and why is it so shocking that Margot 'manned' the rescue boat instead of Jean? As the plot unfolds, it becomes apparent that Jean and his betrothed Yvonne have ambiguous and non-traditional responses to the obligations of gendered manhood. It still important that Jean is seen to be advocating the necessity of manly duties, even more so than his actual performance of them. His worry is not that he did not man the lifeboat, but that this 'lack' will reflect on his manliness, his identity: 'But what will Margot think?' [13].

Perhaps Yvonne knows him best: 'But Jean is too young, he is too delicate'. [9] Her love was never possessive like Margot's, or imperialistic in willing to sacrifice him for the greater good of the country or village. Yvonne's love has room for elasticity in her expectations of manhood. This is perhaps why she accepts Jean's feeble excuse when asked where he has been: 'With Mother Zélie. I ve been reading and talking to the poor old bed-ridden creature', and claiming that he knew nothing of the launching [13]. Of course the audience knows that Jean has been at the local bar, the Trois Dragons, and the implication is that Yvonne would rather have him cowering there than 'performing' as a man out in the storm.

While Yvonne is indifferent about Jean's lack of response to his manly duties, it is Jean, ultimately, who cannot cope with the consequences of re-defining what it means to be a man. Discovering Margot's substitution for himself, Jean says 'I shall go mad if I wait

here' [15]. It is worth noting that he is dramaturgically oppressed, contained within the the cottage (woman's sphere), and not in his traditional domain, the ocean (man's sphere). Jean is ostensibly expressing grief when he mentions madness, because at this point Margot is feared dead. But Bensusan is also suggesting here that such madness results when gender roles are threatened. Praying for Margot's safe return, Jean comments (on the weather), 'this is the awful test—with a wind and a sea like this only Providence can save them' [14]. Marie tries to calm him with the hope of Margot's return, promising that 'she'll come back unharmed'—back to her proper sphere. Marie expresses a wish for normalcy that by now nobody in the room trusts will eventuate.

Jean's expressed faith in Providence as a saviour is reminiscent of 'the tide of change', and used by Bensusan as a metaphor for social progress. Once women have confronted the elements (for weather read male society), then only Providence (read parliamentary change), can save them—'them' being those who oppose the weather (suffragette protest), and ignore the force of nature (inevitable social change). Although Jean is not aware of his own subtext, Bensusan allows the audience this privilege. Despite Yvonne's acceptance of Jean's difference, Bensusan implies that Providence will not be so kind to men who flirt with their own gendered expectations but who do not allow women the same privileges.

In another example which tests the value of gendered behaviour distinctions that attribute strength to men and weakness to women, old man Eustace breaks down. The tumultuous events have been too much for him, and he declares himself too old to cope. Eustace represents, as Jean also does, another victim of feminist change. Bensusan suggests that the quest for change is only worth making if men and women are prepared to make it together. Marie reprimands Eustace when he collapses: 'Come, come man, are you forgetting what you're made of? Aren't you here for to strengthen that weak thing woman? Hearts of oak, are you?' [16]. After this initial harshness, Marie softens and sympathises with Eustace, acknowledging the strain of the situation on all involved, and allows him to cry. After accepting his pain, however, Marie reminds Eustace that strength has nothing to

do with sex, but with maturity, and that his mature strength will be needed for whatever the future holds. 'So come, man, come' she says once more.

In these explorations of gendered manhood and female response, Bensusan has disclosed what she perceives as being the available choices for Edwardian women. Jean, Eustace and Hervé are offered as three distinct examples of manhood. Jean is the modern man, Eustace the old man, and Hervé the man of the future. Hervé's lack of identity in the play mirrors his lack of presence in the real world. While Hervé is presented as the vision of an ideal man, Jean symbolises the man who really will not change and Eustace the man who can not, Bensusan nevertheless pleads that all of these men consider their own possibilities for difference, and their abilities to live with women in a transformed world.

A final evaluation

On first reading, *Nobody's Sweetheart* was disappointing when compared to *The Apple*, but the reading offered in this analysis which emerged from a closer relationship to the play reversed that initial disappointment. *Nobody's Sweetheart* as a feminist fairytale has an appeal and charm which insistently cries out for production. The play reads like a constructed debate between Bensusan and anti-feminists, concealed as dramatic action by displacing the 'stage' of the debate from a London drawing room or a suffrage rally to an imagined fishing village. This is a strategy devised by Bensusan so that her 'voice' may be heard without prejudice. This was a successful tactic because, like any fable, the action takes place in a 'dream' world, where moral victory is inevitably on the side of good.

Finally, why and how did I initially miss the beauty and power of *Nobody's Sweetheart*? Am I wrong now and was I right then? Should my critical decisions have influence? Coming to feminist dramatic criticism, I have come from somewhere—not a vacuum of nowhere—and that 'somewhere' stills runs in my critical blood. Despite many new feminist knowledges informing my readings of theatre, it seems impossible (and perhaps not even desirable) to filter out my initial critical training, entirely based on orthodox receptions of the traditional dramatic canon. According to those undeconstructed

beliefs, *Nobody's Sweetheart* might not measure up dramatically, despite its undeniable sociological importance.

To engage in any critical inquiries with these conflicting visions informing my sight is a difficult enterprise. It is hard to always know, and with any irrevocable certainty, through what kind of critical eyes I cast my gaze. Perhaps it is best to remember Peggy Phelan's suggestion that maybe the eyes are imperfect instruments to view performance anyway, and that 'Doubt may be the best guarantee of presence'.[35] 'Certainty' is possibly an inappropriate word to use in any discussion of theatre. In the kaleidoscope of interpretation that all performance creates, *Nobody's Sweetheart* at least contributes a unique prism of light, one that invokes those who look to look again.

CONCLUSION

What kind of a playwright was Inez Bensusan? Although an extremely productive theatre professional in general, she could hardly be described as a prolific writer.[36] As a result, and once again because of the absence of personal papers which may suggest otherwise, it would be difficult to argue that writing for the theatre was Bensusan's cardinal professional ambition. This did not make her unique among other suffrage playwrights who, like most Edwardian feminists, were busy juggling many personal, political, and professional balls at once. Bensusan's reputation today as a playwright rests on her authorship of *The Apple*, and its profile in the suffrage canon. This exploration has expanded that profile, and revealed further information about Bensusan's motivations as a writer for the theatre through an examination of *Nobody's Sweetheart*.

Bensusan was not without considerable skill as a dramatic writer, and she used that skill in an entertaining and innovative way to further her feminist ambitions for change. In answering the question 'what kind of playwright was she?', Bensusan's commitment to the

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[35] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked*, New York, 1993, p. 180.

[36] It must be pointed out, however, that the three examples discussed in this thesis should not, without further investigation, stand as the entire body of her work. It is highly likely that she wrote many more dramatic pieces, though none of those are on the Lord Chamberlain's list. Any opportunities for further research should, for example, investigate the authorship of a number of anonymous plays that Bensusan could easily have written but—because of her status as an Executive Officer of the non-partisan AFL—may have chosen to submit anonymously.

women's movement can not be ignored, as the content matter of her plays verifies. It was that very content matter, coupled with dramatic writing abilities, which both defined Bensusan's subversiveness and created her popularity as a playwright. That stature was taken seriously by Bensusan, who exercised an advanced sense of political responsibility as an artist. She wanted her plays to affect people, who would in turn actuate change.

Peggy Phelan's recent work on performance documents how the Religious Right in the United Sates argued that Mapplethorpe's photo of a male couple kissing would encourage people to walk out of the exhibition and practice homosexuality.[37] Their argument was based on the subliminal powers of visual imagery, and the operations of performative role models. Phelan's work concentrates on the promotion of difference by performance artists, and the rejection and suppression of difference by those who oppose it. It is a story of ignorance, and hatred, and violence, not unlike that experienced by those earlier activists for change, the suffragettes.

Mapplethorpe may have had entirely different intentions from those attributed to him by the American Religious Right. Nevertheless, he belongs to a tradition of performance artists (believing that 'All portrait photography is fundamentally performative'[38]) whose work challenges those monolithic forces in the United States which oppose equality. Through her work as a playwright Bensusan expressed, at a different end of the century and from a similarly oppressive and inequitable situation, those same concerns for the embracement of difference. That is the kind of playwright Bensusan was. Her plays are about what equality could mean, what opportunities equality could offer to people who lived in her time, and what the costs were if you did not fight for change.

Returning to the argument about the power of visual imagery, used by the American Right as a harbinger of doom, it is necessary to question just what Bensusan hoped to show her audience, and how threatening those dramatic 'real life' images would

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[37] The story of this particular reaction to a Mapplethorpe exhibition was related by Phelan in a lecture on 'Contemporary Theatre and Performance Work in New York' at the University of New England, 8 March 1995. See Phelan's chapter 'Developing the negative: Mapplethorpe, Schor, and Sherman' in *Unmarked*, *op. cit.*, for a general discussion of Mapplethorpe's work.

[38] *Ibid*, p. 35.

have been to certain members of society. Bensusan expected her audiences to react to the exposure of feminist dilemmas contained in her dramas. She structured her writing in a way similar to how Mapplethorpe's performative portraits were structured, containing acknowledgments of both their 'creation and reception'.[39] Because writing was a committed political act for Bensusan, and because she believed in the transformational powers of the theatre, Bensusan chose her words carefully. In charting the conflicts she did, and in their subsequent performances, Bensusan's plays are not a necessarily a militant call to feminist arms, but are rather a plea for enemies to lay down their weapons, and for difference to be acknowledged and embraced.

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[39] *Ibid*, p. 45.