

DIVERSITY AT PLAY

Bensusan's Expatriate Theatrical Career

The argument presented in this chapter is that Bensusan was supremely qualified and uniquely placed to make an extraordinary contribution to suffrage theatre history. Further, that the very qualities which contributed to her success as one of the movement's most popular playwrights also defined her work as a feminist theatre practitioner in other areas. In order to augment appreciation of Bensusan's writing for the theatre, which receives detailed critical analysis in the following chapter, this chapter features extracts from Bensusan's diverse professional life. Aspects of her work as an actress, producer, and 'artistic director' for the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL), Woman's Theatre, and the British Rhine Army Dramatic Company (BRADC) will be explored in an attempt to locate and understand what philosophies and practices informed Bensusan's work as a feminist theatre practitioner.

BENSUSAN AS ACTRESS AND PRODUCER

When Bensusan arrived in England she was relying on her reputation and skills as a dramatic actress and reciter, but she soon diversified into other areas. Contacts within the theatre industry, made mostly through feminist networking, enabled Bensusan to diversify into producing and directing, and even to experiment with film. These professional achievements, though impressive, see her remembered as only a minor player in British theatre history of this time, if she is noted at all.¹ While Bensusan has received attention from some feminist scholars, most notably Julie Holledge and later Sheila Stowell,² certain aspects of her work are presented here for the first time. This chapter aims to present

¹ Bensusan received critical attention for the first time in Julie Holledge's *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*, London, 1981, which was a pioneer feminist theatre history of this period. Since then, Bensusan has received due attention from certain feminist scholars, but this has so far not aided her inclusion in 'general' histories of British theatre. This exclusion is not particular to Bensusan, but is typical of many of her contemporaries.

² Holledge, *ibid.*; Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*, Manchester, 1992.

Bensusan's career as a testimony to the emerging professional differences within the theatre industry of this period, differences that eventually formed an important development in twentieth century theatre. Bensusan's story offers one of the earliest and most interesting examples of the feminist theatre practitioner at work, contesting tradition and forging a different future for women theatre workers.

A long acting career

As an actress, Bensusan performed in over 50 productions from 1897 to 1938, including many suffrage 'classics'.³ She not only performed with the AFL, but with many other theatre companies including Edy Craig's Pioneer Players, the Jewish Theatre League (JTL), and the Play Actors Society. The patchy story of Bensusan's Australian career has already been explored; the only certainty to be gained so far from that story is that her skills ranged from the musical and comic to tragic dramatic recitations. This diversity is also characteristic of her London career. By the time of Bensusan's first known London performance in November 1897, she was twenty-six years old, and judging from pictorial evidence, a great beauty by Edwardian standards.

Bensusan seemed to have all the obvious requirements—talent, experience, beauty and connections—to have enjoyed every success as an actress (to use the term that was in favour then), but her career could be regarded as being fairly mediocre. It is evident that, for whatever reasons, she rarely played leading roles until she was much older, and usually performed with more experimental theatre groups than with those organisations which dominated the London West End. Perhaps this was a conscious decision as a feminist theatre practitioner, or maybe Bensusan's better skills lay elsewhere. Regardless, she constantly performed on the stage for most of her adult life, in many London theatres including the Haymarket, Scala, Royalty, Aldwych, Lyceum, and Drury Lane. Although Bensusan favoured, or was favoured by, alternative performance spaces,

³ As part of a larger project on Bensusan I am in the process of compiling a complete history of her career. All subsequent performance references in this chapter are drawn from that material.



Frau Quixano curses Columbus.

Figure 7.1 *Inez Bensusan as Frau Quixano in the 1914 production of Israel Zangwill's The Melting Pot, as shown in the program (MM).*

such as the Little Theatre owned by Gertrude Kingston, she was nevertheless an experienced West End performer.

Patterns emerge when consulting Bensusan's performance history revealing her as an actress with firm alliances. Those affiliations extended primarily to the JTL, to work with feminist theatre organisations, and to other alternative organisations such as the Oncomers and Playgoers societies which were interested in promoting new British theatre. From the beginning, and even in later years beyond the renunciation of her faith, Bensusan appeared in plays by Jewish authors, and performed under the auspices of the JTL. This professional network was a profitable one for Bensusan, and over the years she performed principal roles in plays including Isaac York's *The Philosopher's Stone* (1908), Bernard Karl Harris' *These Internationals* (1927), H G Woolfe's *Come To Meet the Bride* (1927), and Sholem Asch's *Winter* (1927). Bensusan is probably most remembered as an actress for her interpretation of Frau Quixanc in her friend Israel Zangwill's popular play *The Melting Pot*. Produced at the Court by the Play Actors, *The Melting Pot* was such a success when it first appeared in January 1914 that it transferred in May first to the Queens theatre, and later to the Comedy. Appearing in this original production (at the peak of her suffrage activities), Bensusan participated in many revivals of the play in years to come, playing the same character even as late as 1938 when she was close to seventy years of age.

Bensusan was also devoted to more experimental theatres. For example, she was closely associated with the Play Actors a society which was founded not only to produce classical English works including Shakespeare, but to present translations of well-known foreign works, and also to promote new English authors. This constant exposure to new theatre proved beneficial to Bensusan's development as a playwright, and she devoted much time and energy to this society. Bensusan was involved with many alternative theatre organisations, appearing herself in productions such as *The Test* by Emil Lock with the Oncomers Society (1911), *Hannelle (Dream Poem)* by Gerhart Hauptmann with The Play Actors (1908), *The Cause of It All* by Tolstoy with the Adelphi Play Society (1912), and *Brand* by Henrik Ibsen with the Play Actors (1912). This involvement

1912
CHELSEA ARTS CLUB,
143-145, CHURCH STREET, S.W.

PROGRAMME OF
Dramatic Performance,
GIVEN BY THE
ADELPHI PLAY SOCIETY,
Founder: MAURICE ELYVE.
Directors: G. R. MALLOCH, MAURICE ELYVE.
SUNDAY, MARCH 17th, 1912, at 8.45 p.m.

“Damaged Goods”

(Les Avaries).

By BRIEUX.

Translated by JOHN POLLOCK.

This is the first representation of this famous play in England.

The Characters in the order of their appearance.

The Doctor	MAURICE ELYVE.
M. George Dupont	LESLIE GORDON. <i>(New Theatre)</i>
Henriette, his Wife	BETTY BELLAIRS. <i>(New Princes Theatre)</i>
Madame Dupont, his Mother	ALICE CHAPIN. <i>(Wyndham's Theatre)</i>
The Nurse	MURIEL DOLE. <i>(New Theatre)</i>
The Student	A. P. ALLINSON.
Loches	TELFORD HUGHES. <i>(New Theatre)</i>
A Woman	INEZ BENSUSAN.
A Man	JOHN R. COLLINS. <i>(New Theatre)</i>
A Girl	GLADYS MORRIS. <i>(Whitby Theatre)</i>

Act I. The Doctor's Consulting Room.
Act II. George's Study.
Act III. The Doctor's Room in the Hospital.

Figure 7.2 This 1912 program is from the Adelphi Play Society, one of Bensusan's alternative theatre interests. Her familiarity with Brieux's work influenced her future artistic decisions: one of his plays later formed part of the inaugural Woman's Theatre season (MM).

outside the mainstream of the London theatre scene highlights Bensusan's engagement with theatre as a means of social reform, constantly seeking new textual and performative answers to old dilemmas.

Perhaps of most importance concerning Bensusan's involvement with alternative theatres was the inspiration that it may have provided for other women. She certainly used her influence to promote other women playwrights. For example, The Play Actors, of which Bensusan was on the advisory council, was responsible for the first performance of Elizabeth Baker's *Chains*.⁴ This influence meant that Bensusan provided animated leadership for other feminist theatre practitioners, continuing the sense of comradeship inherent in the suffrage movement.

During 1930s Bensusan often performed as an extra, and even diversified into pantomime. For example, she played the Frenchwoman in Vera Beringer's play for children, *Alice and Thomas and Jane*, which ran for an extended period over Christmas in 1933. But far from easing into retirement, Bensusan continued to put her feminist philosophies into practice. The London theatre scene had greatly changed from the days of the AFL and alternative theatre societies of the 1910s, but Bensusan continued to demonstrate her predilection for strong female roles in plays including Gladys Bronwyn Stern's *The Matriarch* (1932), Bertha Graham's *Duties* (1933), and Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1937).

Some decades before, Bensusan's early work for feminist writers and producers saw her performing in many of Cicely Hamilton plays, including *The Homecoming* (1910), *A Pageant of Great Women* (1910), and *A Matter of Money* (1913), (first Performed at the Glasgow Royal as *The Cutting of the Knot* in 1911). Bensusan worked with many other women playwrights, to name just a few Mrs E Willard, George Paston, (Emily Morse Symonds), and Delphine Gray. Her work with the AFL, to be discussed shortly, had its own stipulations, which perhaps explains why Bensusan never restricted her professional activities to this organisation alone. Participating in the production of new

⁴ See Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

plays by new writers suited Bensusan, eventually inspired her to take the biggest leading role of her career, and begin working as a producer.

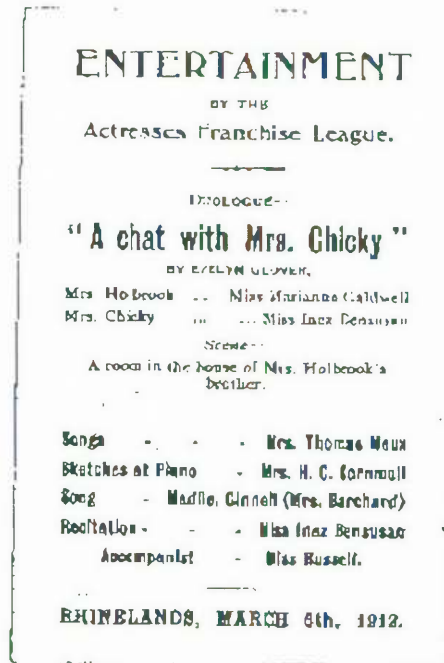


Figure 7.3 A 1912 program from an AFL performance of the popular *A Chat With Mrs Chicky*, starring Bensusan, who was close friends with the playwright Evelyn Glover.

Beyond acting

Given the traditional patriarchal structure of English theatre at this time, Bensusan's sortie into the usually male preserves of producing and directing must be regarded as a highly politicised act. There is not space here to examine Bensusan's 'extra-acting' career in the context of other feminist theatre practitioners engaged in similar activities, such as Edy Craig of the Pioneer Players and Gertrude Kingston of the Little Theatre. This brief account of Bensusan's production work is only meant to suggest that her best work for the Woman's Theatre was not necessarily solely inspired or enabled by her work with the AFL. Bensusan's professional life extended beyond those confines.

Mostly, it was through her involvement with alternative theatres that Bensusan created the opportunities to expand her professional interests. To what extent her embracement of the role of producer was a self-seeking professional action aimed at fame and wealth is difficult to ascertain. Public statements about her work as a producer imply that she was more concerned with improving professional opportunities for women as a whole than she was with increasing her own profile, and that she chose to lead by example. As a result, Bensusan has a string of successful productions to her credit, mostly comprised of women's plays. Aside from producing her own play *The Apple* on more than one occasion, Bensusan also produced, for example, Cecelia F Brookes and Norman Oliver's *December 13th* at the Court (1912), J M Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look* at the Kingsway (1912), and Evelyn Glover's *A Chat With Mrs Chicky* at the Lyceum for the AFL (1912). Women producers and actress managers of this period, as Viv Gardner emphasises, 'constitute[d] a significant challenge to the traditional notions of a woman's place', especially within the institution of the theatre.⁵ Although Bensusan did not meet with the same kind of success that Edy Craig and her Pioneer Players, or Annie Horniman's management of Manchester's Gaiety Theatre did,⁶ these few examples of her work as a producer (during her involvement with the AFL and prior to the establishment of the Woman's Theatre), indicate that she shared their dreams.

At one stage Bensusan diversified into acting for film, of which Julie Holledge provides an account. Bensusan wrote, produced and starred in the film, which no longer survives, although there are extant reviews. Called *True Womanhood*, it was about a woman who, along with her husband, is saved from being sent to the sweatshop by the fairy godmother (played by Decima Moore), who appears in the guise of a suffragette. Holledge notes that the reviews indicate that it was more of a photographic record of a stage play than a film.⁷ With these and other successful productions to her credit, it is no surprise that Bensusan became such an important figure in the AFL. Along with her

⁵ Viv Gardner, 'Introduction' in Gardner & Rutherford. *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, Hemel Hempstead, 1992, p. 10.

⁶ For studies on Edy Craig and Annie Horniman, see for example Christine Dymkowski, 'Entertaining Ideas: Edy Craig and the Pioneer Players', and Elaine Aston, 'The "New Woman" at Manchester's Gaiety Theatre', both in *ibid.*

⁷ Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

successful acting career, Bensusan's work as a producer provided her with a thorough knowledge of the theatre industry, and a solid background to her later work as an administrator. It was her work as an actress, though, which enabled her to meet other notable feminist activists within her own profession, and led to the formation of the AFL.

THE ACTRESSES' FRANCHISE LEAGUE

If not for her involvement with the AFL, Bensusan may have gone without notice in either theatre or feminist history, for it was this organisation that brought her to prominence in the suffrage movement, and created her subsequent profile. There have been various accounts of the AFL, most notably from Julie Holledge, Sheila Stowell, and Viv Gardner.⁸ This account is not concerned so much with the league's reputation and activities and as it is with Bensusan's instrumental role in its success, and the particular qualities of her leadership.

Foundation and success

Formed in October 1908, the league's first meeting was, as Holledge documents, a 'glittering affair as the stars of the West End stage arrived [for the first meeting] surrounded by hordes of fans and autograph hunters'.⁹ As one actress who was present at that first meeting, and interviewed some seventy years later recalled 'The League grew and grew until nearly every actress in the business joined'.¹⁰ Almost immediately the league began performing both in public and private in support of female enfranchisement. Holledge notes that 'as the demand for suffrage entertainments increased, the AFL responded by setting up a separate play department'.¹¹ The Play Department was run by Bensusan; her job involved overseeing the writing, collection, and publication of suffrage drama. Holledge offers an account of Bensusan's work during this period, noting that initially she

⁸ See in particular Julie Holledge, *op. cit.*, Sheila Stowell, *op. cit.*, and Gardner, *Sketches from the Actresses' Franchise League*, Nottingham, 1935.

⁹ Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

must have felt overwhelmed by the problems involved in creating a repertoire of suffrage drama particularly as the audiences were spread throughout the country and were demanding plays which could be performed anywhere from drawing room to a civic hall. Ideally, a permanent AFL touring company was needed, but with no financial backing Bensusan was forced to persuade and cajole actresses into rehearsing in their spare time and performing on Sundays, during the day, or when they were unemployed. The other major difficulty was finding suitable plays. Bensusan approached sympathetic male dramatists as well as women writers and actresses she could find who would put pen to paper, and bullied them into writing a monologue, duologue, or a one-act play.¹²

The achievements of the play department under Bensusan were impressive. Popular performance texts were published to enable ease of production around the country, and to allow the plays to be read and circulated by fans. Today these play scripts, along with the AFL annual reports, remain as important historical documents.

AFL records reveal that Bensusan was a brilliant administrator. From 1909 to 1911, forty three plays performed; from 1912 to 1914, fifteen plays were performed, but 'more frequently and to more diverse audiences'.¹³ In the spring of 1912 Bensusan also provided 'inspection' performances before invited audiences for those representatives who were interested in booking plays. The results of all this hard work and development saw, as Holledge notes, '...a shift in the emphasis of both the form and the content of the League's propaganda repertoire. The actresses and playwrights felt more confident about confronting the political issues which dominated the suffrage movement'.¹⁴ This meant more plays were written which examined specific arguments rather than the form favoured by earlier texts which consisted of generalised documenting of inequalities. This in turn resulted in the replacement of simple, positive images with 'more complex characterisations'.¹⁵ Through Bensusan's direction, the improved quality of the product can be charted.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Although she organised the programs, Bensusan exercised little control over the political content of individual items. Because of the league's commitment to serving rather than leading other suffrage societies, which was inscribed in their founding charter, Bensusan's role had always been that of the 'Lord Chamberlain' in the play department. Holledge argues that she had 'no alternative but to provide non-controversial plays', that is, plays which did not pit one faction of the women's movement against the other.¹⁶ It was perhaps because of this role that Bensusan decided that conditions for the development of a feminist theatre could be better, and began planning the Woman's Theatre project.

Meanwhile, Bensusan's inspired leadership saw her play department making great progress in forwarding the objectives of the league, which were to convince their fellow professionals of the need for female enfranchisement, and to work for that enfranchisement by educational methods.¹⁷ Those methods included meetings and lectures, and the production and publication of propaganda plays. The importance of Bensusan's play department, and the AFL in general, to the suffrage campaign has been neglected by feminist historiography, with only feminist theatre historians arguing for its prominence. Claire Hirshfield, for example, argues for the crucial contribution of Bensusan's work to the suffrage movement, noting that Asquith created a challenge to which the AFL was more than able to rise. Soon after taking office, Asquith met with suffrage leaders and said that providing suffrage societies could demonstrate that English women wanted the vote, his Government would support female enfranchisement. As Hirshfield recognises, the onus of proof was thus placed squarely on the shoulders of organisations such as the AFL, and great energy was released in the movement with fresh educational campaigns embarked upon.¹⁸ Bensusan was therefore the artistic director of a political organisation extremely well placed to influence the public at a strategic point in the suffrage struggle. She wasted no time in participating in that struggle, securing an

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁷ These objectives are set down in the AFL constitution (FL), and documented in Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. iii.

¹⁸ Claire Hirshfield, 'The Actresses' Franchise League and the Campaign for Women's Suffrage 1908-1914', *Theatre Research International*, vol. 10, no. 2, Summer 1985, p. 130.

excellent reputation for the AFL play department's capacity to win and influence audiences.

Into murky times

Achieving such a high public profile was not without its costs for women who were involved in AFL campaigns. As Hirshfield and others have noted, political commitment was especially alarming to the actresses, 'For to serve a controversial cause was ultimately to put at risk a career which necessarily rested upon...public approval'.¹⁹ Gardner suggests that this same dilemma explains the actresses' relative 'tardiness' in forming a suffrage society in the first place.²⁰ The pressure to please the public without offence, Hirshfield argues, is the reason why the league had avoided 'the murky area of feminist politics' for so many years.²¹ This situation changed when Asquith's Conciliation Bill was introduced, promising to enfranchise only women householders, which of course most actresses were not because of the nature of their profession which compelled them to travel frequently. As a professional class threatened with exclusion, this bill forced the AFL into becoming overtly political. Consequently, at the end of 1912 AFL president Gertrude Elliot addressed the Speaker of the Commons, pleading on the actresses' behalf. The AFL also secured over 100 000 signatures after a formidable petition drive, but these bold efforts failed to move the Commons. However, by 'the flamboyant theatricality of its campaign [the AFL] had emerged in a leadership role'.²² This leadership role subsequently reduced the league's privacy, and internal disagreements became public.

While the issue of the AFL's political sympathies is a fascinating one deserving more attention, Bensusan's stance as a celebrated individual within that very public organisation is what is pertinent to this study. Was Bensusan a suffragette rather than a suffragist? Given her public speeches, debating positions, and friendships with known militants, it is most probable that she was, but this did not unduly affect her work for the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Gardner, *op. cit.*, 1985, p. i.

²¹ Hirshfield, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

²² *Ibid.* p. 141.

league. As Gardner points out, although there were militant members of the AFL who were imprisoned, 'Most actresses in the League could not, or would not...risk their livelihoods to this extent', because 'Many managers were...unwilling to employ a militant with a prison record'.²³ This probably did not frighten Bensusan as much as it did many of her colleagues. As her activities during this period indicate, she was working in other professional areas than acting, and may even have considered herself influential enough as a producer to be in an employer rather than employee situation.

In 1911, the AFL experienced its largest and most public disagreement. As Gardner reiterates, although a declared neutral league, there were still philosophical tensions apparent within the AFL to do with the question of militancy, as experienced by most suffrage organisations. The AFL supported both camps, and this led to the serious dissonance that resulted in a permanent rift. At a public meeting, AFL member Maude Arncliffe-Sennett, virtually supporting militancy, clashed with the then vice president, Irene Vanbrugh. Vanbrugh was hissed and booed for her denunciation of Arncliffe-Sennett (who was friendly with Bensusan). Both women remained in the league, but following this, there 'was a falling off in active participation by the AFL in non-theatrical events'.²⁴ Bensusan was on her friend's side in this debate, but continued her loyalty to the league believing in its benefit to the suffrage campaign, and using the opportunities of her office to develop her skills.

More important than the question of whether or not Bensusan was a suffragette is the issue of how her political sympathies influence her professional work for the AFL, especially in her position as what would be recognised today as artistic director. Suffragettes were non-constitutional political activists, their campaign was a retaliation against the betrayal of their patience, faith, and trust in a system that was not seen to be working in their favour. As a feminist theatre practitioner, Bensusan experienced both the frustrations of women seeking the suffrage, and of women theatre workers seeking equitable access to and representation within their profession.

²³ Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁴ Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

Male playwrights: a deliberate tactic?

Militant tactics employed in the suffrage campaign, although endorsed by Bensusan, had no place in her feminist campaign to reconstruct her and other women's professional environment. With no wish to promote separatism, and no real ambitions to experiment with feminist alternatives to theatrical form, Bensusan's reforms were inclusive and liberal in their philosophical vision. This did not exclude decisions such as the use of male playwrights to renegotiate positions of power for women. As Julie Holledge remarks, Bensusan 'never considered limiting the AFL productions to plays written by women, in fact nearly one third of the plays performed by the league were written by men'.²⁵ Bensusan recognised that men had an important role to play in feminist reform. Unlike later uses of theatre by feminists which rejected male voices, particularly the women's theatres of what is often referred to as 'second-wave feminism', Bensusan had no qualms about male involvement in her feminist enterprise.

This did not seem to hinder the development of individual feminist voices in suffrage theatre, as Holledge notes: 'Whereas the men wrote suffrage plays to demonstrate their support of the movement, the women were stimulated by the movement to express themselves in a creative form hitherto denied them'.²⁶ Perhaps if Bensusan's goals as artistic director had been more focussed on exploring feminist theatrical expression, rather than on issues of humanitarian reform, then the repertoire of the AFL play department would have been different. As it was, Bensusan was more interested in what was said than in how it was said, or who was saying it.

For feminist theatre practitioners today, this is a sensitive issue: to what extent is it legitimate that men speak for women, and to what extent should theatrical forms which have traditionally worked against women be endorsed? These issues are of concern to feminist dramatic criticism, and have been discussed by various critics elsewhere in this thesis. Although pertinent to an examination of Bensusan's work for the AFL, to focus on

²⁵ Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

those issues alone would be misleading. I agree with suffrage historian Patricia Grimshaw that 'An approach to women's history must first respect ways women themselves perceived their personal situations; otherwise we assess women through intellectual paradigms inherently unsympathetic to the specificities of women's life experiences'.²⁷ A significant component of Bensusan's subjectivity that defined her leadership of the Play Department, was her liberal humanism which envisioned all people working in harmony with each other—after professional and political reforms had been won. Meanwhile, she adroitly chose sympathetic men to fight not *for* the AFL, but *with* them. This was partly because they needed as many plays as possible, and playwrights were not always easy to find. Perhaps Bensusan's repertoire decisions were also influenced by the recognition of another historical subjectivity—that men had more power than women in Edwardian England, and she wanted to harness their capacity for influence.

Any full-length study of the AFL should allow room to explore fully the similarities and differences between male and female suffrage playwrights, and to find out how their works were commissioned and received by the public. This would be important for new gendered understandings of suffrage history, and may well reveal Bensusan as an excellent political lobbyist, pitching the best cultural weapons she could against an unsympathetic government without unduly offending conservative female suffragists. For this to be possible, male suffrage playwrights would need to be examined in a new light. Feminist dramatic criticism, with its primary emphasis on the text and less on the conditions of how and why texts were produced, has joined those historians of women who 'have been rather slow to recognise the dialectical relationship between women's agency and patriarchal structures'.²⁸ Historians such as Joan Scott and Patricia Grimshaw continue to point out that suffragists must be recognised as having had 'unstable speaking positions',²⁹ and that their place in the public world was precarious. In such a world, and particularly in the theatrical profession, the AFL was extremely careful about what it said.

²⁷ Patricia Grimshaw, 'Women's Suffrage in New Zealand Revisited: Writing From the Margins', in Daley & Nolan (eds), *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, Auckland, 1994, p. 33.

²⁸ M Nolan & C Daley, 'International Feminist Perspectives on Suffrage: An Introduction', in *ibid.*, p. 8, & Grimshaw, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

While negotiating a voice for the AFL, Bensusan acknowledged that the male voice had superior authority in Edwardian England. However, Bensusan controlled those playwrights who, as men, controlled the right of women to vote. She therefore successfully manipulated male voices to speak out against corruptions of male power whilst simultaneously enlarging her potential audience. This decision, one of her best as artistic director, was a politically astute one. Bensusan recognised both women's 'unstable speaking position', and acknowledged men's power whilst at the same time exploiting it. 'Suffrage studies', Nolan and Daley argue, 'are no longer just concerned with how the vote was won...a new type of political history is being embraced by feminists, political histories which do not deify male involvement, but acknowledge it'.³⁰ Such gendered approaches to suffrage history extend understanding about power relationships, and Bensusan provides a wealthy case study for how professional feminists negotiated their way to different positions of power.

Bensusan met the obligations of her position as director of the play department with verve and audacity, providing AFL performances for an even spread of suffrage societies, both militant and non-militant. Certain evidence, however, suggests that she was dissatisfied with constrictions placed upon her. This, along with her personal support of militant suffrage campaigns, defines Bensusan as a sympathetic if not active suffragette, constrained as she was by her prominent position in a non-aligned league.³¹ This is not meant to glorify Bensusan's role in the suffrage movement. Rather, it is meant to indicate that although Bensusan was a 'proper' Edwardian woman in one sense, in another she represented that new breed of professional women who would no longer stand to be exploited. Bensusan, as a suffragette, would embrace any means to renegotiate positions of power in order to further her art for herself, for other women theatre practitioners, and for her audiences. Respecting differences within the AFL, and acknowledging the league's

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³¹ See for example *Votes For Women*, 22 May 1914, where it was advertised that: 'The League has undertaken a platform in Victoria Park on Sunday, May 24 where the East London Federation of suffragettes are holding a demonstration. The speakers will include...Miss Inez Bensusan', p. 545. Bensusan was also friends with Winifred Mayo, and other WSPU sympathisers.

support of her role and the opportunities it provided, Bensusan caused no damaging rifts either within the movement or her own profession. She chose instead to branch out from the AFL. Her reputation and respectability intact, Bensusan plotted what was hoped to become a great development for feminist theatre, the Woman's Theatre.

THE WOMAN'S THEATRE

Bensusan realised her dreams of establishing a women's theatre, but there has been scant attention paid to the importance of this project, with the recent exception of Claire Hirshfield's article, which calls the co-operative as 'an experiment with broad implications'.³² It is generally considered to be a failed venture, its vision having been compromised and its initial success frustrated by the advent of the First World War. A more acute reading of the theatre's limited success, and an assessment of its historical context, sheds new light on Bensusan's dream. What exactly was Bensusan's vision, and how and why did she compromise it?

Foundation of the cooperative

Bensusan's vision for an independent woman's theatre company, 'one of the pluckiest artistic ventures of modern times',³³ was shared by many actresses who had experienced something different since they had been involved with the AFL. As Julie Holledge notes, the play department had given actresses the opportunity to expand their theatrical knowledge to include stage management, administration, and other areas.³⁴ Building on this experience Bensusan announced plans to set up an independent Woman's Theatre Company in an issue of *Votes for Women*. This is an extract from the interview where she proclaims her ambitions.

'I want it to be run entirely by women...The whole business-management and control will be in the hands of women...there will be women business and stage-managers, producers, and so on. Actors and authors will naturally be drawn from both sexes, and so will (at present) the scenic artists. My ultimate

³² Claire Hirshfield, 'The Woman's Theatre in England: 1913-1918', *Theatre History Studies*, vol 15, 1995, pp. 123-138.

³³ 'Drama and Music', *Votes For Women*, 19 December 1913, p. gh.

³⁴ Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

hope', she continues ambitiously, 'is to establish a Women's Theatrical Agency in connection with the Woman's Theatre; but that must remain for the present only a dream, as there are many difficulties in the way for such a departure over here, although in New York the two most successful theatrical agencies are run by women.'³⁵

The nuts and bolts of the cooperative's planning and foundation have been well documented by others;³⁶ basically, the enterprise was financed by the sale of share subscriptions which were 'purchased primarily by women engaged in all aspects of the women's movement' (Elizabeth Robins financed her Ibsen series in a similar manner).³⁷ The 'how' is easier to account for than the 'why', but Hirshfield offers one explanation. She describes the spring 1913 production of Alison Garland's four-act play *The Better Half* as 'the most ambitious of the League's theatrical productions'. A humorous satire in a mythical setting where only women vote and the men are agitating for citizenship, the play was 'elaborately staged', 'ably acted', and 'an important aspect in the evolving feminist drama'. Hopes for a transfer to a West End theatre were disappointed, but the play enjoyed matinee revivals until February 1914. This success was sufficiently encouraging for Bensusan to 'plan even more ambitious projects', including the Woman's Theatre.³⁸

Hirshfield strongly links the Woman's Theatre with the AFL. To a certain extent this can not be disputed, considering the overlap in personnel and shared political and artistic philosophies, but Hirshfield's account is too simplistic. She suggests a pattern that sees Bensusan taking advantage of the 'lethargy and inanition' attributed to the league's executive committee befalling internal conflicts. This, together with the 'falling off in demand for platform performances', enabled Bensusan to 'step into the vacuum of leadership' and devote her attention to 'her most cherished goal', the Woman's Theatre.³⁹ This account implies two things that are questionable. Firstly, Hirshfield portrays Bensusan as though she were involved in some kind of an unwelcome takeover bid,

³⁵ *Votes For Women*, 23 May 1913, p. 498.

³⁶ See for example Holledge, *op. cit.*; Stowell, *op. cit.*; and C Hirshfield, 'The Suffragist as Playwright in Edwardian England', *Frontiers*, vol. X, no. 2, 1987. For contemporary commentary, issues of *Votes For Women* during 1913 and 1914 provide a blow by blow account of the theatre's development.

³⁷ Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

³⁸ Claire Hirshfield, 'The Suffragist as Playwright in Edwardian England', *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁹ Claire Hirshfield, 'The Woman's Theatre in England: 1913-1918', *op. cit.*, p. 125.

whereas she was in fact a member of the executive committee and devoted to arbitration. Secondly, the Woman's Theatre was a far more distinct entity from the AFL than this account allows. Hirshfield is quick to attribute the AFL's influence in the formulation of Bensusan's plans, but does not acknowledge her longstanding involvement with various play societies, which I argue provided greater inspiration for her devising of the Woman's Theatre than did the AFL. Undoubtedly, the infrastructure of the AFL was of great support in this enterprise, but had that support not been available Bensusan would nevertheless find or create alternatives. The Woman's Theatre did not rely on the AFL for its existence, it relied on Bensusan.

Shy to explore Bensusan's disenchantment with the AFL, Hirshfield confusedly presents evidence to support her claim that the the Woman's Theatre was primarily an AFL enterprise. She argues that in March 1912 the AFL rejected the ambitious project devised by various play societies which proposed a federation of sorts to pool funds and organise festivals. This is correct; the AFL representative explained that they were not interested because 'it was franchise first and drama afterwards with them'.⁴⁰ This public statement clearly indicates that the AFL was sticking with their suffrage concerns, and not prepared to engage on a general level in broader feminist issues. This is exactly what Bensusan wanted to do—and had been doing to a certain extent in through the Play Department—with the Woman's Theatre, yet Hirshfield does not make this connection that charts Bensusan's discontent. Instead, she simply says that Bensusan's announcement (eighteen months later) of the Woman's Theatre cooperative was 'a considerable shift in AFL policy'.⁴¹ AFL policy had not changed Bensusan had. Although she reported all progress on her cooperative to the AFL, with whom she remained in constant communication, Bensusan was increasingly running her own show. This is most apparent in her choice of plays for the inaugural season.

Plans to include a play by Brieux, most of whose work had been censored in London, were courageous, but Bensusan was nothing if not a risk taker. She constantly

⁴⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

emphasised that the Woman's Theatre project was meant to allow the AFL to 'widen the sphere...by establishing a permanent season for the presentation of dramatic works dealing with the Women's Movement'.⁴² 'Permanent' is the word which excited Bensusan most, but 'Dealing with' and not 'written by' is the key term here. To what extent is it fair to express disappointment at Bensusan's decision to exclude women playwrights from the first season? Perhaps it is more valuable to acknowledge the positive aspects of that decision. For example, the selection of texts by Brioux and Bjornson provided the opportunity for British audiences to gain insights into issues of importance to the women's movement in non-Anglo countries, and stressed the internationalism of the feminist cause. Produced within a feminist theatrical cooperative, this was an interesting development in women's theatre history.

Did Bensusan really have any alternatives to the choices she made? There seemed little point in duplicating the theatrical services already offered by the Play Department of the AFL, the confines of which were already obvious to Bensusan and others. The Woman's Theatre can be seen as an attempt by Bensusan to break out of the spectrum of suffrage drama by constructing a more permanent feminist theatre—one that would last beyond the achievement of the vote. Stowell voices the frustrations that inspired Bensusan's vision, noting that attempts to 'construct a more permanent feminist theatre within the boundaries of the suffrage movement was ironically precluded by the movement itself, which considered feminist drama as an advertising and fundraising adjunct to the more pressing work for the vote itself'.⁴³ In response to these constraints Bensusan formulated an alternative.

The plays, and the implications of their selection

Why did she choose plays written by men, and should this decision compromise assessment of the worth of the enterprise? Bensusan, along with Cicely Hamilton, was on the council of the Play Actors since its foundation in 1907. Mounting translations of

⁴² AFL Annual Report 1912-13, p. 13 (FL).

⁴³ Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

notable foreign plays was part of their brief. It was no surprise to many, then, that the plays chosen for production by Bersusan were both foreign plays written by male playwrights. These plays were Bjornson's *A Gauntlet*, produced by Miss Winifred Mayo, and Brieux's *A Woman On Her Own* (*La Femme Seule*), produced by Miss Janette Steer.⁴⁴

The first play of the season was *A Woman On Her Own*, translated from the French by Charlotte Shaw. The plot revolves around a woman who rejects the privileges of her upbringing and attempts to lead an independent life. She finds work in a factory, and participates in a feminist newspaper in her spare time. Eventually, hardships and defeat force her to return to Paris where she becomes her former lover's mistress. The dramatic question of the play, 'What is a highly educated, young, and beautiful woman of the "upper classes" to do for a living if she is forced to break loose from her ordinary surroundings?', was discussed in the feminist press. It was also noted that Mrs Galsworthy's play, *The Fugitive*, dealt with similar themes and situations.⁴⁵

Second in the season was *A Gauntlet*, translated from Norwegian by Mr Farquharson Sharp. Written in 1883, its theme concerns the operation of double standards regarding sexual morality. The plot concerns a provincial girl who breaks her engagement to the son of a bourgeois family because she discovers that he has been the lover of a married woman. The play's essential comedy is derived from the ensuing conflicts that result in the girl learning of her own parents' endorsement of these sexual codes, and her seeking refuge in the friendship of her newly reformed ex-fiancee.⁴⁶ The way in which both male and female points of view are balanced in *A Gauntlet* earns it credit as 'a great play'.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Claire Hirshfield points out that Janette Steer was a militant feminist and an intimate of the Pankhursts: 'The Woman's Theatre in England: 1913-1918', *op. cit.* p. 128.

⁴⁵ See for example, 'Woman On Her Own', *Votes For Women*, 12 December 1913, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Julie Holledge provides a more detailed description of the plays chosen by Bersusan in her discussion of the Woman's Theatre in *Innocent Flowers*, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-6.

⁴⁷ This reviewer commented that 'The fair way in which both the man's and woman's case is put, the courage of the girl who refuses to accept the current standards of morality, and the note of hope at the end which makes the right concession to human nature without conceding the principle, are all elements that go towards making Bjornson's play great'. 'Drama and Music', *Votes For Women*, 19 December 1913, p. 177.

WOMAN'S THEATRE.

GENERAL COMMITTEE

Miss Victoria Addison	Mrs. Goodhart	Mrs. Kington Parkes
Mrs. Anstruther	Mrs. Ayrton Gould	Miss Ruth Parrott
Lady Betty Ballour	Miss Evelyn Glover	Miss M. A. Pelly
Mrs. Mark Barr	Miss Bertha Graham	Mrs. Pertwee
Mrs. Ritchie Bennie	Miss Gripper	Lady Forbes Robertson
Mrs. Cavendish Bentinck	Mrs. Haden Guest	Miss Ina Royle
Mrs. Blount	Miss Cicely Hamilton	Mrs. M. Lucette Ryley
Miss Nina Bonicault	Miss Marjorie Hamilton	Mrs. Gilbert Samuel
Miss Adeline Bourne	Miss Bessie Hatton	Mrs. A. Savory
Miss Georgina Brackenbury	Mrs. H. D. Harben	Mrs. Schütze
Miss Margaret Bussé	Mrs. Marion Holmes	Mrs. Archife Sennett
Miss Margaret Cameron	Mrs. Hooghwinkel	Miss Evelyn Sharp
Mrs. Cobden-Saunderson	Miss Sydney Keith	Mrs. Bernard Shaw
Mrs. Chapin	Mrs. Kerr	Lady Sybil Smith
Mrs. Cecil Chapman	Miss Shirley King	Miss Hilda Smyth
Miss Stanley Clark	Mrs. Labrousse	Miss Blanche Stauley
Mrs. Herbert Cohen	Miss G. Lally	Miss Janette Steer
Miss Vera Collum	Mrs. Pethick Lawrence	Miss E. M. Symonds
Mrs. Corbett-Fisher	Mrs. Carl Leyel	Mrs. Percy Thompson
Lady Cowdray	Mrs. Waldemar Leverton	Mrs. Thompson Price
Miss Ethel Dane	Miss Florence Lloyd	Miss Tite
Miss Darragh	Lady Muir Mackenzie	Miss G. Vaughan
Miss G. Dart	Miss Chrystal Macmillan	Mrs. Vulliamy
Mrs. Despard	Miss Winifred Mayo	Mrs. Ben Webster
Miss Joan Dugdale	Lady Meyer	Miss Dora West
Miss Jessie Dunbar	Mrs. Merivale Mayer	Miss Penelope Wheeler
Mrs. Evans	Mrs. Mouillot	Mrs. Margaret Woods
Mrs. J. B. Fagan	Miss Juliette Mylo	Mrs. Lamartine Yates
Mrs. Fawcett	Mrs. Mansell	Miss Ruth Young
Miss Di Forbes	Miss Mary Neal	Mrs. Zangwill

THE AIMS OF THE WOMAN'S THEATRE ARE:

To present plays, written either by men or women, which show the woman's point of view.

To provide a new outlet for the activities of women members of the theatrical profession.

To run the Theatre on a co-operative basis, guaranteeing sharing in the profits.

To help and forward the Women's Movement to enfranchisement, and to promote the unification of all suffrage and feminist societies.

NOTE: Anyone who is interested in The Woman's Theatre, and who desires to become a guarantor, or to help in any way, is requested to communicate with:

MISS INEZ BENSUSAN,
Hon. Organising Secretary to the Woman's Theatre,
2, Robert Street, Adelphi, W.C.



MISS INEZ BENSUSAN.

Figure 7.4 *Insert from the souvenir Woman's Theatre Inaugural Week program, December 1913, with Bensusan pictured in a theatrical pose gazing towards her manifesto (MM).*

'Who worries about the sex of the writers?', asked Cicely Hamilton in her promotion of the Woman's Theatre.⁴⁸ Hamilton's introductory program notes emphasised the perceived advantage of male playwrights, reminding the audience that The Woman's Theatre, aside from its cooperative employment aims, also existed for

...the presentation of what is known as the Woman's Point of View. And, in order to present the Woman's Point of View to the best advantage, an opening choice has fallen upon the work of two male dramatists...I consider [the choice] wise and fortunate. For downright and unadulterated feminism, always give me a man! All really slashing attacks upon man are made by his own sex.⁴⁹

On the one hand, Hamilton's tone seeks to underline the randomness of the choice of male playwrights as though it was a casual decision. In the next breath, she is lauding the merits of male power effecting feminist change. Holledge commented that Hamilton's words read like a 'sarcastic apology',⁵⁰ but they seem also to be a confused defence of artistic decisions that not everybody was certain about. Perhaps more was on the agenda than recent writings on the Woman's Theatre have even considered. For example, what does the cooperative's rejection of ensemble practices and innovative techniques really mean,⁵¹ and what does this say about feminist theatre's attempt to move into the mainstream? Such questions would be interesting to consider in a fuller study of the Woman's Theatre than is possible here.

Stowell agrees with Holledge that the choice of male playwrights for the inaugural Woman's Theatre season is 'an irony that resulted at least in part from the concentration of women playwrights of the time on what Holledge calls 'one-act, small cast plays'. Stowell goes on to say that 'certainly the aesthetic limitations of suffrage drama are readily apparent; brevity and clarity of meaning were virtues encouraged at the cost of more ambitious and ultimately richer full-length drama. It is painfully apparent that rejecting the

⁴⁸ Cicely Hamilton, 'The Woman's Theatre—What it Means', in the souvenir program, *Woman's Theatre Inaugural Week* (MM).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁵¹ Hamilton said in the souvenir program, *op. cit.*, that: 'We have no unusual views on the presentment or production of plays. We have been influenced neither by the Russian ballet nor Reinhardt; we make our exits into the wings instead of into the stalls; and I have not heard of any particular struggles to attain the ideal of nobody acting better than anybody else which is frequently referred to as "ensemble"...we feel these admissions may be damaging...we take the theatre as we find it'.

professional theatre to write and stage propaganda plays for the converted invited easy marginalisation'.⁵²

Considering contemporary critical reaction to the first season, Bensusan may have made a mistake in her choice of plays as extracts from these reviews suggest. The first one is from *The Suffragette*:

With all M Brioux's earnestness and high ideals, I cannot look upon such a false and pessimistic presentment of women in the labour-market as desirable propaganda for the feminist cause...it is very good of M Brioux and others to champion the women's cause, but I wish they would do it in a more optimistic spirit, and be a little less lavish in their pity...I wish some woman would write a play showing the real spirit of the Suffragette. It has never been done yet, and I do not believe that a male dramatist will ever do it.⁵³

The second example deals with *A C'auntlet*. Even though 'hundreds of contemplated marriages' were said to have been broken off on the continent in response to Bjornson's play, Holledge remarks that its dramatic theme received a 'faintly superior' treatment by British feminists.⁵⁴ Although British feminists considered themselves to be better off than their Norwegian sisters when it came to parity in heterosexual relationships, the play was still considered worthwhile. Despite progress in the women's movement regarding sexual moralities, the feminist press argued, much of the public were not educated in these measures of equality, and as a result '... the women's movement therefore owes a good deal to the Women's Theatre' for having chosen the play.⁵⁵ These reviews and others reflect the wider concerns within feminist theatre at this time, which probably explains their emotional responses—both positive and negative—to Bensusan's ambitious project.

Holledge suggests that the selection of plays was Bensusan's response to both the women's movement, which wanted plays that idealised a feminist future, and to actresses, who had insufficient training outside of realism to express that idealism: 'when a character was given a political as opposed to an emotional justification', the results were dissatisfying.⁵⁶ Well aware of this artistic and professional dilemma, Bensusan was smart

⁵² Stowell, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁵³ *The Suffragette*, 12 December 1913, quoted in Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 96

⁵⁴ Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁵⁵ *Votes For Women*, 19 December 1913, quoted in Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 95

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

about her selection, choosing plays which were of a style that AFL actresses were familiar with, but which nevertheless offered them challenging and larger roles in productions that dealt with themes of concern to feminists. As the reviewer in *Votes For Women!* commented, the plays received a 'hearty reception' from crowded houses.⁵⁷ Originally, there had been plans to include 'some new one-act plays dealing with the women's movement', but for whatever reasons they were not included in the opening season.⁵⁸

The success of the first season

Enthusiasm abounded following the success of their first program in December 1913. As Bensusan describes here in the annual report:

The financial results exceeded all expectations, and gave to all shareholders a substantial return...apart from the financial side, the artistic success of the two very important productions...was emphatic. The work of the inaugural week has proved invaluable; firstly in the matter of proving the power of women to organise and run a theatre--since women were employed in every department as Producers, Stage Managers...Box office, etc, and the experience was valuable in the amount of confidence such enterprise inspired; secondly in demonstrating the appreciation of the public...Thirdly, and most important of all, is the proof that women can work together for a common purpose in perfect harmony and disinterestedness...it was the unity of co-operation which accounted for the final remarkable result...it is quite possible that in a few years time that the women's theatre will become a permanent institution.⁵⁹

It could be argued that the actual event was very modest in comparison with the original vision, as Holledge and others have emphasised, because of the plays being written by men, and the cancellation of the second season due to the war.⁶⁰ Should these 'failures' discount the feminist enterprise involved in this theatrical milestone? The Woman's Theatre was devised, after all, as a cooperative intending to assist financially other suffrage societies and, as Bensusan announced, to 'spread accurate knowledge through the educational medium of the theatre'.⁶¹ Both of these goals were met.

⁵⁷ 'The Woman's Theatre', *Votes For Women* 12 December 1913, p. 158.

⁵⁸ 'The Woman's Theatre', *Votes For Women*, 23 May 1913, p. 498.

⁵⁹ AFL Annual Report 1913-14, p. 14 (FL).

⁶⁰ Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁶¹ AFL Annual report, 1912-13, p. 13 (FL).

Aside from the financial success of the season, Bensusan should be congratulated for her ability to attract notable performers and other theatre professionals. As an interview before the season's commencement announced, the cast was 'no ordinary one', and included 'actors of the front rank' such as Lena Ashwell, Sarah Brookes, Leonard Calvert, O B Clarence, Cicely Hamilton, William Slack, and Muriel Wylford.⁶² Success in attracting 'names' in turn raised the profile of Bensusan, her theatre, and the suffrage movement in general.

Intriguing developments: the planned second season

After the announcements of the Woman's Theatre inaugural performances met with such enthusiastic response and financial support, there seemed little doubt that a permanent season could be established. Consequently, plans were immediately underway for a second season, and positive feeling only increased after the completion and success of the first season. An article by Winifred Mayo, for example, articulates that this confidence led to the spending of profits before the second season had even been confirmed. Concerned with documenting the flaws and discriminations in operation within the acting profession in regard to obtaining money from the War Distress Fund due to unemployment in the theatre industry as a result of the war, Mayo reveals that, to this end 'the proceeds of the Women's Theatre will this year be devoted'.⁶³ Bensusan and her colleagues were counting on repeating the success of the first season, and seemed initially unperturbed by the advent of the war on their plans.

By October 1914, though, an announcement was made that the program for the second season had 'been slightly altered to meet the changed situation brought about by the war'. Productions of a grander scale were to be substituted by 'short plays and other interesting events', to comprise what was advertised as 'high class variety entertainment'.⁶⁴ Anticipating disappointment amongst the subscribers, and fearing the loss of anticipated new patrons, the publicity for the second season took a new tack. Aside from reminding

⁶² 'The Woman's Theatre', *Votes For Women* 28 November 1913, p. 135.

⁶³ Winifred Mayo, 'The war and the theatres —What the AFL is doing to stem distress', *Votes For Women*, 21 August 1914, p. 706.

⁶⁴ 'The Woman's Theatre', *Votes For Women*, 9 October 1914, p. 15.

punters that they had made significant financial returns from their original subscription investments and could hope to do the same again, advertisements made emotional appeals to the political goodwill of the audience. One such promotion began 'Why Suffragists Should Support it', saying that part of the profits from the second season would go to the Three Arts Women's Relief Employment Fund. That cause, it was argued, was worthier than most: 'When we remember how gallantly and unselfishly the actresses have given their services to the Suffrage cause for the last five or six years, it surely behoves us now to stand by them in their hour of distress'.⁶⁵

This approach demonstrates a fundamental change in attitude from when promotion for the second season had begun in earnest only a few months before. During the (northern hemisphere) summer months, everyone was still busy rejoicing the more than 50 per cent return on their investment from the first season. In July it was announced that the second season would begin on 30 November. Two plays would be produced, one of which had already been selected: 'Miss Cicely Hamilton's adaptation of Miss Elizabeth Robins's powerful story, *Where Are You Going To?*'⁶⁶ Later developments proved this announcement to be premature, and complications over the next few months suggest that changes in program had less to do with the war than they did with internal problems within the theatre cooperative.

Writing to Miss Robins in June 1914 asking for a 'definite reply' with regard to her play, Bensusan was already sounding peeved, pointing out that 'I have already lost the best date through the delay and shall have to take a date later not quite so good'.⁶⁷ Robins' reply must not have been too encouraging, and it appears that she wanted to change the ending of her story for its stage presentation—most probably to meet censorship requirements. Bensusan objected to this, arguing that 'Your book fulfilled a definite purpose...we would like the play to do the same'. Most anxious to settle this matter, Bensusan reminded Robins that she was in the middle of negotiating theatre contracts for the proposed season, and that it was 'imperative that I have this trump card'—that is,

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Votes For Women*, 24 July 1914, p. 660.

⁶⁷ Bensusan to Robins, 6 June 1914. Elizabeth Robins Correspondence (FL).

Robins' play—before contracts could be finalised. Realising that she may have been a little pushy, Bensusan continued in a more conciliatory and flattering manner:

I am so sorry to keep pestering you like this, but I feel that the Woman's Theatre is the right medium for the presentation of your wonderful story. I feel that we could do such an immense amount of propaganda with it, and of course I should begin and boom it at once. I firmly believe that we should have an overwhelming success with it, and reach quite a large section of the public that might never come across the subject in any other way.⁶⁸

Bensusan closed with kind greetings and apologies, but to no avail as tensions only increased.

During July, while Bensusan was on holidays further complications developed. Bensusan had submitted Hamilton's adaptation to the Lord Chamberlain, and received a communication that said 'it was a play which called for special attention'. Meanwhile, only 200 of the necessary 500 pounds had so far been raised, and there seemed to be a nervousness creeping into the proceedings.⁶⁹ Immediately following this, Robins' reply shocked Bensusan into this response:

I hardly know what to say in reply...I was feeling so confident about the arrangements for your play, and so happy in having got the support of yourself...to our proposal. If you recollect your words to me were 'Very well, go and arrange terms with Mr Golding Bright'...and he said 'whatever terms you suggest I am sure...Miss Robins will agree to'...From this conversation I naturally assumed that as there would be no trouble about terms we might confidently proceed with arrangements.⁷⁰

This confidence was shattered by Robins' apparent anger that terms had not been finalised before the play had been sent to the Lord Chamberlain, and that she had been neglectfully kept in the dark about proceedings. Bensusan now feared that this time-saving decision would cost the theatre their hoped for hit of the season, and resorted to flattery and appealed to Robins' good will not to withdraw the play and ruin the great deal of initial work that had already gone into its production.

⁶⁸ Bensusan to Robins, 12 June 1914, *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Signature illegible, on Bensusan's behalf to Robins, 25 July 1914, *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Bensusan to Hamilton, 28 July 1914, *ibid.*

As this letter marks the end of their correspondence, the outcome of this appeal is not known. It is certain, however, that the Woman's Theatre had to amend their program, and it is highly likely that this dispute with Robins was responsible. The war played its part, no doubt, but Robins' withdrawal would have significantly set back the appeal for funds. During all this time the Woman's Theatre, under the direction of the AFL, had been organising entertainments in soldiers' camps, both to provide entertainment for the soldiers and employment for the actors, and this too proved to be a drain on the funds of the theatre. On the programs for the camps entertainments the Woman's Theatre continued to advertise its second season, as late as February 1915 when they proposed that it would next be held in May.⁷¹

This postponement turned out, in the end, to be a cancellation. Historians concur that the demise of the Woman's Theatre was a serious loss, and generally attribute its 'failure' to the war: 'One casualty of the war, and perhaps the most serious in the longer term history of women in theatre, was the Woman's Theatre'.⁷² It is also generally believed, as Gardner demonstrates, that had the cooperative 'flourished and become a permanent institution, it might have served to heal not only the rift in the AFL itself, but provide a more lasting "women's theatre" than the Camps Entertainment group were able to do'.⁷³

Reflections beyond 'failure'

When historians lament the fact that the war hampered a second season that would have seen a women's theatre company producing plays by women, perhaps that regret should be extended to what I consider to be as great a tragedy: that Bensusan's opportunity to contribute to theatre and feminist history as one of British theatre's most innovative producer/actor/managers was frustrated. The success of the first season had proved, from any point of scrutiny within the profession, that Bensusan's managerial skills and commercial sensibility could not be denied. It is the loss of opportunity for the

⁷¹ Program for 'Washington's Birthday Matinee Tea', 22 February 1915 (MM).

⁷² Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

consolidation of Bensusan's career, as well as the demise of her theatre, which should be mourned.

McConachie reminds us that it took three hundred years for English writers to denote the process of putting together a show with the word 'producer', and that this linking of artistic and economic activity first emerged in the 1890s. In Bensusan's case, it is worthwhile to remember that not only was the producer as a theatrical practitioner a relatively new professional definition but it was also traditionally defined as a male reserve. McConachie criticises theatre historians for being 'much more attentive to the means rather than the relations of theatrical production'. This would be a great misdemeanour when considering Bensusan's *Womans' Theatre*.⁷⁴ For instance, without those 'relations' to the feminist movement and the AFL, Bensusan's cooperative would never have even begun. Further, the separation of 'means and relations' in theatre history results in what McConachie condemns as the artificial separation of the aesthetic from the practical. In feminist theatre, which relies for its very definition on the feminist marriage of the practical considerations of production with the aesthetic 'product', such a separation is abhorrent. Therefore, as well as considering how Bensusan financed and organised the *Woman's Theatre* (the historical evidence of which is highly visible to the theatre historian), it is as important to consider the aesthetic choices Bensusan made for her theatre, which is why I have devoted so much space to discussing her selection of plays.

Recognising the opportunity for profits, many producers of this time became involved in the theatre as capitalists. They rationalised their positions of power in arguing that they were giving the public what they wanted.⁷⁵ Bensusan does not fit this category: she gave the public what *she* wanted, or what she thought they needed. Economic profit, though welcomed and recognised as necessary, was not the primary motivation. Although feminist producers and actress/managers of Bensusan's time aimed at financial success, they did so recognising the power of money to ensure the continuation of their feminist theatrical enterprises. Without assessing such financial aspects of women's theatre history,

⁷⁴ Bruce A McConachie, 'Historicising the Relations of Theatrical Production' in Reinelt & Roach (eds), *Critical Theory and Performance*, Michigan, 1992, p. 169.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

there can be no alternative explanation for the emergence of a producers' theatre which allows suitable space for feminist aesthetics. McConachie, without specifically recognising this hole, is nevertheless bothered by historical explanations that take no account of alternative theatrical enterprises which would question this explanation. He encourages theatre historians to seek out structural historical forces beyond the control of individuals, which may have shaped culture and society, and consequently theatre. This, McConachie argues, would require

extensive empirical and theoretical investigations into the sophisticated conditions necessary for the emergence of various kinds of theatres, the relations between the historical forms of theatrical expression and the dominant ideology of a historical period, and the functions of theatre in reproducing, modifying or contradicting hegemonic relations in production.⁷⁶

I agree with McConachie that when theatre historians consider all kinds of histories of their period, such transformation is possible. As this thesis constantly reiterates, when dealing with the early decades of the twentieth century, the women's movement can not be ignored as a historical player in theatre history. As Janelle Reinelt says, 'Turn over a theatrical paving stone—you'll surely find a feminist or two'.⁷⁷

The fulfilment of Bensusan's aspirations for the Woman's Theatre did not happen. As the work of the AFL continued throughout the war, so too did the Woman's Theatre continue to work in a special capacity, inaugurating itself as the Woman's Theatre Camps Entertainments. The war was not the end of Bensusan's story, but it proved to mark the end of her most influential years as a feminist theatre practitioner. This adds extra resonance to her work for the Woman's Theatre. Most accounts of the Woman's Theatre more reflect historians' expectations about what *they* think should define a woman's theatre cooperative than what Bensusan's guiding philosophies and principles actually were. Feminist theatre historians perhaps need to cease imposing presentist valuations of this historical achievement in order to appreciate more fully Bensusan's significant contribution to the development of feminist theatre history. The newest adventure of women', was how

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁷⁷ Janelle Reinelt's introduction to 'Feminism(s)' in *ibid.*, p. 229.

Bensusan's Woman's Theatre was described by her contemporaries. They believed their enterprise was going to be 'not only one of the most interesting episodes in the history of the women's movement, but also in that of English drama'.⁷⁸ Perhaps they were more right than they realised, and more right than theatre history has so far conceded.

THE BRITISH RHINE ARMY DRAMATIC CORP

On that milestone day for British women when the House of Commons passed the Electoral Reform Bill which gave the vote to all women over thirty,⁷⁹ Inez Bensusan was working in Germany. She was a leading figure in the British Rhine Army Dramatic Company (BRADC), whose task was to entertain the occupying troops. There are no records of when Bensusan received this news or how she reacted, but she no doubt just got on with the show. 'The Show', at this point in Bensusan's career, was an interesting one indeed. This section briefly examines Bensusan's theatre work during and after the war. It is commonly thought that suffrage theatre lost its impact with the advent of the war, and that women's theatre in general lost its momentum with the winning of the vote. Bensusan, like many of her old colleagues, continued to pioneer new feminist frontiers in 'post-suffrage' conditions.



Figure 7.5 Bensusan's BRADC passport (MM).

⁷⁸ 'The Woman's Theatre', *Votes For Women!*, 28 November 1913, p. 135.

⁷⁹ The age limit was lowered to that of 21, equal to men, in 1928.

Company formation and conduct

The BRADC was formed by Lieutenant S E Percy in Cologne, Germany, in January 1919. Evidence documenting Bensusan's involvement in this enterprise is scant. What evidence that does exist about the BRADC is drawn from a single source, *The Cologne Post*, an English newspaper published for the benefit of the occupying forces. Bensusan's involvement with the BRADC adds a special dimension to the cultural history of the British Army.

While the establishment of entertainment within the armed forces is a common occurrence, the success of the BRADC was phenomenal. Although receiving institutionalised support, the accomplishments of the company relied heavily on a few energetic forces. Firstly, there was the audience and their needs:

We had scarcely cooled down after the never-to-be-forgotten trek into Germany after the armistice, before the authorities realised the importance of healthy entertainment and commenced to arrange for our social welfare on a well organised basis. A definite department for the supervision of this was generally agreed to be a necessity...⁸⁰

Given this need, the Amusements Office in Cologne, run by Captain Haygarth, formulated a entertainment plan which included drama, variety performances, music, sport, and pictures. Soon after the establishment of the Amusements Office, Lieutenant Piercy arrived and 'wasted no time in forming what has since become one of the most widely known institutions in Rhineland—the British Rhine Army Dramatic Company'.⁸¹

Basically, the British Army 'took over' any suitable venue for this venture, justifying their actions on two grounds: that the German proprietors were doing indifferent business on a local level, whereas the British Army provided huge audiences; and secondly, that the demand for entertainment by the occupying army was too great to ignore.⁸² Initially, the Amusements Officer looked no further than the Army of Occupation for talent, but circumstances were to change the character of the company, including the loss of players through demobilisation. Consequently, not only were local

⁸⁰ Author unknown, 'Rhine Army Amusements', *The Cologne Post*, Christmas 1919, p. 29.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

Germans and Russian troops employed, but various companies were brought in from England. The arrival of the Women's Theatre Company, 'with Miss Bensusan at the head of affairs', was described as a memorable occasion, no less so because this was the first time British women had been seen in Germany since the armistice.⁸³

Bensusan and the actresses she brought with her on this enterprise added considerable prestige to the company.⁸⁴ The BRADC was not only extremely popular in Cologne, but in high demand outside of their own zone, and eventually toured. There were other variety theatre companies established by the troops, but demobilisation resulted in frequent disbandment. The BRADC was popular, drawing huge crowds even when there was much competitive entertainment on offer. Housed mostly in Cologne's Deutsches Theatre, the BRADC's first production was in May 1919. *The Mollusc* by Hubert Henry Davies was followed by 'much of the best in English dramatic literature', including plays by Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde.⁸⁵

To what extent Bensusan exercised artistic control of the BRADC can only be conjectured, but certain circumstances indicate that it was her theatre to do with what she wished. Given her history as artistic director of the AFL, her prominent position as head of the Women's Theatre Company (which seemed to have been automatically absorbed into the BRADC), and her reputation as a playwright and actress of some note, Bensusan was in an excellent position to exert artistic control. It was noted, for example, that after the arrival of the Women's Theatre Company, a number of one-act plays were presented 'with great success'.⁸⁶ Their repertoire could well have included Bensusan's AFL favourites. Unfortunately, no comprehensive performance records of the BRADC have survived. If not strictly suffrage plays, the Women's Theatre Company no doubt brought their own theatrical agendas to the BRADC. These were, after all, actresses who had been politicised members of the AFL. They were the professional 'post-Hedda' women described by

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸⁴ These actresses were: Miss Shirley King, Miss Gabriele Paul, Miss Hilda Potts, and Miss Beale. The BRADC was later to include Miss Frances Cushman. Bensusan herself also acted.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Holledge, actresses who now could not be satisfied with less.⁸⁷ The advent of the war did not dissipate the feminist politics of these women, but rather modified them; it was this modified feminism that would have permeated the BRADC entertainments. While exactly what the BRADC performed remains mostly speculative,⁸⁸ what is apparent is that plays championed by these actresses—Shaw's and Ibsen's, especially—were popular and oft performed as troops' entertainments.⁸⁹ In 1919, for example, Bensusan is credited with presenting 'a number of one-act plays with great success'. Even before Bensusan's arrival, the troops had been treated to 'the best in English dramatic literature', with the *Cologne Post* citing Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde among others as examples.⁹⁰

That these actresses were involved at all in the war effort immediately distances them from the radical peace stance adopted by various suffrage feminists and organisations, but this in no way excludes this enterprise from feminist theatre practice, nor does it divorce the actresses themselves from their personal suffrage politics. It may have even been an astute professional decision by Bensusan to work in a theatrical company outside of England, away from the dour post-war West End fare. Tremendous artistic freedom would have been possible, and all paid for by the army: sure money in uncertain times, when women's unemployment was on the rise, would have been difficult to refuse. Bensusan's decision could in fact have been more influenced by such circumstances than any assumed sense of patriotic duty of 'entertaining the boys'. These circumstances—the 'away from home' freedom, the army as a financial backer, an enthusiastic audience who were more willing to expose themselves to different forms of entertainment—allowed plenty of room for dramatic experimentation. *Robinson Crusoe* reigned supreme one moment, and *The Merchant of Venice* the next; a musical was followed by *Pygmalion*. The BRADC was not afraid to take risks:

⁸⁷ See for example Holledge, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁸⁸ A fuller history of the BRADC remains to be written. Unfortunately, because of the confines of this thesis, and the constraints of time, money and distance, more extensive research was unable to be conducted.

⁸⁹ Susan Cullen demonstrates this point in 'Australian Theatre During World War One', *Australasian Drama Studies*, no 17, 1990, p. 165. She discusses Australian prisoners of war and the Ruhleben Theatrical Company, for example, noting that the new drama was widely popular as troops' entertainments. See also various editions of *The Cologne Post* to note this same tendency with the BRADC.

⁹⁰ 'Rhine Army Amusements', *The Cologne Post*, Souvenir Christmas Edition 1919, p. 30.

SOUVENIR NUMBER, 1920



Miss Bensusan.



Lt. Percy.



Major Chance & Lt. Col. Doaden



The Cast.



Miss Chisholm & Mr. Coates.



Mr. Humphrey Hope



Miss Bensusan & S.S.M. Sibbald.

(Cologne Post Photo 1920)

"MERCHANT OF VENICE" By the B.R.A.D.C.

Figure 7.6 Bensusan in various roles that she performed for the BRADC, taken from the Souvenir Edition of the Cologne Post, 1920, (British Imperial War Museum).

Perhaps the greatest plunge we have made was the employment of Mrs Patrick Campbell, our greatest English actress, to assist the BRADC in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. It was a big financial outlay, and the artistic result was acclaimed by all. It was voted a great treat to Rhinelanders.⁹¹

It was such spunk that created the company's success, and Bensusan was orchestral in creating this profile. The *Pygmalion* event organised by Bensusan, ultimately produced financial results which 'would do credit to our best British organisations', whilst all the time charging 'abnormally small' prices.⁹² Once again Bensusan's production skills brought her acclaim.

Bensusan felt sufficiently proud of her involvement with the BRADC to keep her passport documenting her time in Germany and her attachment to the company (considering that the document was required to be handed in to the military permit office as soon as one ceased to belong to the Rhine Army⁹³). It is one of the few, indeed rare, pieces of personal documentation that exist about her. The BRADC played an important role in post-war Europe. Closer examination of this subject would be profitable for theatre history, its success questioning for example the prominence normally attributed to the vogue of cinema by cultural historians of this period.⁹⁴ Bensusan and the women of the BRADC do not support either of the notions that portray feminist activism ceasing with the onset of war, or feminist desires as being placated by the achievement of the vote. Instead, Bensusan's post-suffrage theatre work only reinforces her place as an important and diversely talented suffrage theatre practitioner.

CONCLUSIONS

Peta Tait describes a feminist theatre practitioner as 'someone who works with an awareness of the complexity of recent feminist theoretical positions and recognises the diversity and difference of women's social experiences'. Although Tait is referring to a contemporary scenario here, this definition, as this examination of her complex theatrical

⁹¹ 'Rhine Army Amusements 1920', *The Cologne Post*, Souvenir Edition 1920, p. 40.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Identity Card issued by the Rhine Army, British Army of Occupation, to Inez Bensusan (MM).

⁹⁴ Entertainment reportage in the *Cologne Post*, for example, implies that Bensusan and the BRADC were considered to be superior entertainment, and more popular than the cinema on offer.

career demonstrates, certainly fits Bensusan. Tait goes on to say that if a feminist theatre practitioner 'readily identifies feminism as an influence on her artistic expression rather than on her professional status, then she largely precludes the compromises necessary to work in mainstream theatre'.⁹⁵ Tait uses 'mainstream' in the sense of 'big budget' commercial or subsidised theatre, distinguishing it from 'fringe' or small venue productions. Bensusan, by this definition, was primarily a feminist fringe theatre practitioner. Her excursions into the mainstream of the London theatre world were only ever in the capacity of an actress, and were probably motivated by financial rather than aesthetic concerns.

Bensusan devoted her professional energies to the nurturing, development, and execution of feminist theatrical enterprises. Therefore, for the feminist theatre historian, Bensusan's 'failures' are at least equally as interesting as her more acknowledged successes. They reveal the professional, political and personal desires of an extraordinary and visionary woman who worked during the British suffrage era, and carried her desires through the horrors and barricades of the First World War. To what extent Bensusan still considered herself an Australian or an expatriate can only be conjectured. Nevertheless, the story of her professional ambitions and endeavours is typically that of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian theatre professionals who could not have hoped for such career or life opportunities to manifest themselves at home. Bensusan, a privileged, educated, and talented Sydney Jewess with family wealth and support on an international level, travelled to London and made quite a name for herself as a feminist and theatre practitioner. Without the wealth of her Australian heritage, that 'name' may have been quite different indeed.

⁹⁵ Peta Tait, *Converging Realities: Feminism in Australian Theatre*, Sydney/Melbourne, 1994, p. 12.