

EXIT AND ENCORE

Bensusan's Later Life and Legacy

Currently, Bensusan has no profile as a notable Australian and is absent from Australian theatre histories. This is in distinct contrast to her profile as a player in the British suffrage movement. Beginning with Julie Holledge's groundbreaking study, she has received creditable attention from feminist scholars within the context of British women's theatre history.¹ Those accounts, as this study hopefully suggests, have been informed by viewing Bensusan primarily through a focus on the AFL. This has resulted in limitations being applied to Bensusan as subject which have created accounts with restrictive results for both suffrage and theatre history.

The difficulties in Bensusan as a biographical subject because of lack of personal papers can only be reiterated. Despite those problems the evidence and observations presented in this study hopefully contribute to, and also challenge, what has so far defined Bensusan as a historical subject. Feminist biography, incorporating postmodern possibilities, need not necessarily rely on traditional scholarship methods in order to tell its stories. Some recent biographies of notable women—Louisa Lawson for example—offer alternative models for historical investigation,² and Bensusan's story would probably be well served by similar scholarly inquiries. This study, though, has been more concerned with the skeleton than the flesh of Bensusan's life, utilising new empirical evidence as the backbone supporting critical inquiry into her work as a playwright. In conclusion, this chapter briefly considers the interesting turns that Bensusan's life took in her later years.

¹ The major accounts to date of Bensusan and her work appear in the following publications: Julie Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*, London, 1981; Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*, Manchester, 1992; and Claire Hirshfield, 'The Woman's Theatre in England: 1913-1918', *Theatre History Studies*, vol 15, 1995 and 'The Actresses' Franchise League and the Campaign for Women's Suffrage 1908-1914', *Theatre Research International*, vol 10, no 2, Summer 1985.

² See for example Brian Matthews, *Louisa*, Ringwood, 1987.

BENSUSAN'S LATER CAREER

Bensusan's ongoing professional association with British theatre has already been noted, but there remains some unsolved mysteries about her working life. Her involvement with the British Rhine Army Dramatic Company (BRADC) partially solves the mysterious gap in her English performance career, but available records reveal that she did not perform again in London until December 1926. In all likelihood, the BRADC disbanded in 1921, thus there still remains a five-year mystery period where Bensusan seems to be, for the time being, historically hidden. Why wasn't she acting? Did she travel (her family was living on four different continents)? Given the immigration records kept at the time, this is virtually impossible to trace. What is certain is that in London she sat for a portrait painted by Sir Cecil Rea, a notable English artist, dated 1924. Rea's painting was included in various exhibitions, and he later gave it to Bensusan, who eventually bequeathed it to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where it is now housed.³ If Bensusan did spend this 'mystery' period in London, the records do not show that she was working, at least not in the theatre.

The fact that Bensusan appeared not to be working professionally for some time could partly be explained by the death of her father in October 1917. He had been living with Bensusan (at 8 Lansdowne Road, Holland Park, London) and died a wealthy man.⁴ Inez and her sister Orvida Hopkins were the main beneficiaries of their father's estate, which included a lump insurance sum, annual incomes, personal real estate and international land holdings, and interests in a Sydney smelting company. It would be fair to assume that Bensusan's subsequent working life had very little to do with the need to earn an income, but it remains uncertain how much of this wealth eventually found its

³ 'Portrait of Inez Bensusan', by Cecil Rea, 1924, as documented in Renee Free, *Art Gallery of NSW Catalogue of British Paintings*, 1987. Bensusan must have enjoyed some fame or reputation as an actress and subject considering the exhibitions the painting received (which included the Ridley Art Club). She must also have considered herself to be of significant stature to warrant the NSW Art Gallery receiving her bequest (unless of course she was modest and was merely bequeathing her home city a painting by a noted English artist).

⁴ S L Bensusan's will is an enlightening document. For instance, it reveals that Inez was herself a woman of means: whilst bequeathing Inez all his household articles, he acknowledges that many of the household effects of 8 Lansdowne Rd had in fact been purchased by Inez 'with her own money, or having been given to her by friends'.



Figure 9.1 *Portrait of Inez Bensusan by Cecil Rea, 1924 (Art Gallery of NSW). Bensusan was 53 years old when she sat for this painting.*

way into Bensusan's hands. Her father expressed concern in his will that the 'depreciation in values occasioned by the present war' may result in his estate not being sufficient enough—though 'sufficient' is of course a subjective term. Even if all of his fortune was lost through the war, Samuel Bensusan's life insurance alone would have left his daughter enough on which to live comfortably.

This view is modified by the memory of Bensusan's grand-nephew, Robert Appleby,⁵ who recalls that his 'Aunty Neen' lived in a three-storey house in Chiswick, which was later turned into three flats after bomb damage during the Second World War.⁶ Bensusan apparently lived off the rent from two of the flats and occupied the third. Even if this was so, that does not rule out the possibility of private income from her father's inheritance. Her will did, after all, mention trust funds left to her by her father, and Bensusan's estate at the time of death was valued at over twelve thousand pounds.⁷

In the remaining years that she did work Bensusan made a niche for herself as a character actress. Her last noted performance, according to official records, was in October 1938. However, Appleby distinctly recalls having seen his great Aunt performing on two occasions between 1945 and 1957. While these performances seem to have eluded documentation, it is certain that at age 67 she played the role of Frau Quixote one last time in her friend Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot*. This continued association with the Jewish Drama League, who produced the show, implies that she was still a practicing Jew. This was not so in her later years.

ANOTHER LIFE

Bensusan lived until October 1967, a monumental 96 years. During the intervening years since her retirement, Bensusan's life underwent profound changes—not the least of which was abandoning Judaism in favour of Christian Science. Due to lack of personal papers,

⁵ All information cited from Robert Appleby is the result of personal correspondence during 1994, in my possession (quoted with kind permission).

⁶ *Ibid*: Appleby recalls that a garage on these premises housed all of Bensusan's theatrical wares. Correspondence with the present owners of this house revealed that this garage was destroyed by the previous owners of the house. If anything personal of Bensusan's was still in that garage, that is where it has gone.

⁷ This information from the last will and testament of Inez Bensusan, dated 27 October 1966.

extremely little is known about this period of her life. What evidence I do have has been provided by Bensusan's surviving, elderly relatives, most notably her niece Jill Croxford, who holds affectionate memories of her Aunt, as does her son, Robert Appleby. It seems that Bensusan's family profile and reputation was barely informed by her professional life and reputation. Croxford recalls that her aunt's life and work as a suffragette and actress were viewed with 'surprise' by the family.⁸

The artist Pissaro lived in Bensusan's vicinity; they were close friends, and he gave her several of his paintings.⁹ She was also 'very fond' of the London actress Maggie Abanesi. After visits to the theatre 'a number of people would return to her house for tea and biscuits'.¹⁰ Bensusan had a grand piano in her drawing room, and would occasionally hold 'little concerts...to entertain a few of her friends'.¹¹ On a social basis, she was still moving in theatre circles until the late 1950s, and most likely until her death.

It seems that Bensusan relied more and more on such friendships in later years, as her conversion to Christian Science alienated her from much of her family. When she became involved with this religion is not clear, although she would have more than likely been acquainted with the philosophy of Christian Science from her days in the suffragette movement, when a few of the women leaders she knew advocated it, and it was in vogue as a topic of discussion in society at that time. What is also unknown is whether or not her 'theatre' and 'religious' circles overlapped. Family members recall that she attended meetings with 'her Society', and some warned her not to attempt to influence the family's children, which she apparently never did. It was the elderly women from her Christian Science circle who visited Bensusan most in her old age, reading to her as her blindness gradually took over. Inez Bensusan never married and had no children, though she doted on her sister Orvida's children, and in fact pointedly referred to this devotion in her listing

⁸ Any information offered in this section is a result of personal correspondence with Jill Croxford, to whom I am deeply indebted, during 1994. Letters in my possession; quoted with permission.

⁹ These paintings were willed to Jill Croxford who was in fact the sole benefactor of Bensusan's estate. Croxford claims that these paintings, along with many other personal effects, never came into her possession as Bensusan was blind in her old age, and apparently told her Christian Science friends and visitors to take what ever they liked. They did. This could be where Bensusan's personal papers and professional memorabilia disappeared to.

¹⁰ Letter from Robert Appleby, April 1994.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

in the *Suffrage Annual Who's Who*, describing her hobbies as gardening and care of children. Bensusan's relatives whom I have contacted recall her with a great fondness and affection, remembering her as a generous and kind person.

ENCORE?

In later life, Bensusan underwent some important changes, but somehow they do not seem unpredictable in the life of such a courageous and adventurous woman. The story of her old age reveals that she was a determined, energetic, intelligent, lively, and gracious woman involved in a quest for a better world right up until her death. Bensusan died in October 1967 of cardiac failure. Her death certificate cites her as being 'a spinster...of no occupation'. In her long life, it is interesting to speculate what Bensusan herself would have considered her most important occupation to be. It can only be said that the legacy of her pioneering efforts continues today. At the close of *The Apple*, when the character Ann asks, 'Who got the best of the argument?', Helen has to admit that she lost—but what happened after the curtain? In some ways, Bensusan's relative obscurity and limited profile give the impression that her life and work lost the arguments they were engaged in. This account of Bensusan hopes to win no arguments, but instead calls only for Bensusan's continued encore.

CONCLUSIONS

Hopeful Sites of Accomplishment

Australian suffrage theatre has three main sites of accomplishment. The first is the political achievements wrought through artistic engagement with the community at large. Australian feminist playwrights realised that the vote was only a symbol for the larger issues of emancipation driving the women's movement. Animated by their enfranchised status, they offered unique perspectives to the suffrage cause's use of theatre as a political weapon and its revolutionary definitions of what was possible for women. This theatrical freedom signifies the second site of accomplishment. How those revolutionary ideas were expressed saw the emergence of new theatrical languages and aesthetic confrontations with form and theatrical spaces, resulting in the development of feminist dramaturgies. It is the memory and acknowledgment of those first two sites of feminist achievement which create the third site of accomplishment. The stories offered in this thesis operate as an active feminist legacy, one that informs not only Australian women's and/or theatre history, but questions intellectual hegemonies even within feminist scholarship which have for too long excluded Australian experiences.

Aspirations

This story of Australian suffrage theatre has offered a revision of Australian theatre historiography, and indeed early modern women's theatre. While it is important to consider how the rest of the world views Australia, most of all I have been concerned with how Australians view themselves. This reflection is a necessary task given the continuing dilemmas of representation in Australian historiography. A recent and widely acclaimed feminist history of the Australian suffrage movement, in considering Australian suffragists overseas, portrayed Miles Franklin as regretting her time in America, and as having achieved little as an expatriate: 'Although she toiled at her writing whilst she was in Chicago, she wrote nothing of worth in those years. Her first burst of creativity was before

she left Australia, and she did not find its source again until she returned to her own country and its themes'.¹ This is a common, but dated, summary of Franklin's life as an expatriate and, as this thesis has demonstrated, profoundly mistaken. That it can be so recently repeated in such a respected scholarly enterprise highlights a problem of specific relevance to Australian feminist research—the problem of self-identity.

Despite the first histories of Australian women appearing over two decades ago, and even though there has been a wealth of publications and research since then, Australian feminist historians still operate in a comparatively small market. Perhaps because of this there has not been enough feminist self-criticism or consultation across the disciplines. For example, a recent Australian feminist history that contested the masculinist myth of the 1890s, in spite of including diverse examples from literature and the art world, failed to incorporate a consideration of women's theatre.² This is an irksome neglect considering both the popularity and influence of theatre on Australian society at that time, and the glut of Australian theatre history sources available to consult and draw upon. Further, historians of the Australian women's movement, although sensitive to the international character of feminism and the issues that concerned suffrage feminists, are more likely to deal with the stories of women who stayed at home. This study has hopefully begun to redress those circumscribing limitations.

The greatest hope contained in this thesis is that the telling of the stories of these suffrage playwrights will lead to the weaving of new feminist fabrics in Australian history. The Franklin example cited above is representative of the kind of revision which needs to be accomplished. That example also emphasises the achievements of this thesis in creating new perspectives on already notable Australian feminists, in introducing others, and arguing that those stories combine in a startling way to call for a reconstruction of feminist theatre history. The strongest argument of this thesis is that closer consultations with cultural history will provide opportunities of great promise not only for Australian historiography, but for feminist and theatre historiography world-wide. To echo Gayle

¹ Audrey Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: A Gift or a Struggle?*, Melbourne, 1992, p. 241.

² Magarey, Rowley & Sheridan (eds), *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*, Sydney, 1993.

Austin's sentiments, 'My biggest conclusion is that just about everything remains to be done and the prospects for just that are very exciting'.³

Future research possibilities

Beyond the parameters of this particular study, and indeed still within them, the potential for further research in early Australian feminist theatre history appears enormous. It is perhaps easiest to imagine my own place in that continuing discourse, which obviously reflects my interests rather than implies priority areas for future scholarship. For instance, a biography on Bensusan would add considerably to Australian feminist historiography. I am currently compiling an appendix to her theatrical career, a hopeful beginning to such a project. So many biographies concentrate on the achievements of Australian women within the physical boundaries of the continent, and usually pay attention to different kinds of women and different types of notoriety. Bensusan's difficulty as a biographical subject is conspicuous because of the dearth of source material traditionally favoured by biographers, but she is nevertheless a tempting subject for anyone interested in investigating the powerful liaisons of women, politics, and culture in our history.

Only the skirt hems of Miles Franklin's theatrical career were glimpsed in this exploration of her. A full book on Franklin as playwright is a necessity considering her dominant position in Australian cultural history, and the general ignorance of her important theatre work. Franklin was a prolific writer of plays and, having waited decades for the rewards of her difficult apprenticeship as a suffrage playwright, met with theatrical success in Australia in the later years of her life. Given the industry surrounding anything to do with Miles Franklin, a collection of her plays should prove to be most popular. A book presenting an as yet uncharted territory of her life's achievements would be a welcome addition to Australian cultural and literary history, and add a significant chapter to political historians' understanding of the suffrage movement.

This thesis explored only one example of international suffrage theatre on tour in Australia. Through the (limited) examination of audience reception to *Diana of Dobson's*,

³ Gayle Austin, *Feminist Theories For Dramatic Criticism*, Ann Arbor, 1990, p. 94

differences between Australian and English audiences were highlighted. Less obviously and perhaps more impressively, cultural and political differences between Australian states so few years after federation are revealed. Other examples of suffrage theatre on tour in Australia would also be illuminating. Elizabeth Baker's *Chains*, for example, was popularly performed, and its performance history establishes how feminist drama was handled by small repertory theatres rather than large commercial managements. A fuller study of international feminist theatre on tour in Australia, or suffrage actresses and managers for that matter, would make an eminent book; it need not be limited to the suffrage period, though that might be a logical starting point.

What conservative women were doing with theatre at university compared to their more radical feminist colleagues; Katharine Susannah Prichard's full length suffrage plays; the feminist concerns of Australian playwrights before suffrage become a central issue; and plays written by men which professed to support suffrage feminist agendas—these are intriguing areas which await further investigation. The examples of future research possibilities raised by the inquiries of this thesis recall the words of English suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst, who said about the women's movement at the conclusion of her biography, 'Great is the work which remains to be accomplished!'⁴

Contemporary relevance of suffrage theatre

Contemporary interest in suffrage plays is vital in the attempt to deconstruct women's theatre history. Christine Dymkowski stresses this need, for instance, in her work on Edy Craig and the Pioneer Players. She quotes here from Nicholl's *English Drama 1900-1930*, which insists that 'The short pieces sponsored by actresses active in the Votes For Women movement can be dismissed'.⁵ Women playwrights were actively producing and performing feminist theatre earlier this century. It was exciting, timely, and even dangerous to do so, yet influential theatre histories such as Nicholl's refuse to acknowledge the energy and inventiveness of suffrage theatre, or to consider that these plays may have

⁴ E Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, London, 1988 (1931), p. 609.

⁵ Christine Dymkowski, 'Entertaining Ideas: Edy Craig and the Pioneer Players', Gardner & Rutherford (eds), *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, London, 1992, p. 230.

significant contemporary relevance. To test these conflicting ideas through performance is reason alone to generate contemporary productions.

This has already been achieved for many British suffrage playwrights. As Michelene Wandor has documented:

A new departure in the relationship between today's feminists and yesterday's theatre was initiated by the group Mrs Worthington's Daughters, which was initially spurred by the research which Julie Holledge was doing for her book on Edwardian theatre, *Innocent Flowers*... Their original policy was to perform 'plays from the past either by or about women' and their first programme [was] in early 1979.⁶

Mrs Worthington's Daughters' performances included J M Barrie's *The Twelve-Pound Look* (1910), Margaret Wynne Nevinson's *In The Workhouse* (1910), and Githa Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* (1912). Wandor also points out that in 1978, Sidewalk Theatre company had toured a program of suffragette monologues, songs, and sketches.⁷ Suffrage plays have received even more recent revivals, for example, the London Theatre Museum offered an entire program of suffrage drama in 1990.⁸ Helen Day also orchestrated revivals of suffrage theatre when in 1990 she founded a theatre-in-education company based at the Pankhurst Centre in Manchester, *Between the Lines*, which explored, among other themes, women's suffrage.

Recent revivals of suffrage theatre have been assisted by the fact that many of these plays are easily accessible, especially in the British context because of the AFL's Play Department's diligent publishing program. Hence it was not such an onerous task for researchers to locate plays for publication today. Julie Holledge began this task with the inclusion of three plays in the 1981 publication of her book *Innocent Flowers*. In 1985 Viv Gardner edited a collection of twelve plays entitled *Sketches From the Actresses Franchise League*. That same year saw the publication of Dale Spender and Carol Hayman's *How The Vote Was Won* which included seven suffrage plays. In the American context, in 1987 Bettina Friedl edited a collection of early feminist plays called *On To*

⁶ Michelene Wandor, *Carry On Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*, London, 1986, p. 84.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Unfortunately, correspondence with the London Theatre Museum revealed that they kept no records of this event, which included a performance of Bensusan's *The Apple*.

Victory: Propaganda Plays of the Woman Suffrage Movement.⁹ Forthcoming is a collection of Australian suffrage plays, edited by myself, as part of series devoted to raising the profile of Australian women playwrights.¹⁰ It seems that many publishers, at least, are convinced of the merits of these plays, despite the fact that critics such as Nicholls continue to dismiss the historical and (by implication) contemporary pertinence of suffrage theatre. Sheila Stowell's arguments for the value of suffrage theatre are far more convincing: 'Although obscured by the passage of time, both plays and performances need to be reckoned with...The reception of these texts in their own day attests to the power they exercised over initial audiences and critics'.¹¹

Flirting with the canon, or how good is good?

Is it a proper solution to call for the inclusion of suffrage plays into those dramatic canons which have been exclusive to women playwrights, and doubly exclusive to women playwrights from 'fringe' artistic communities such as Australia? As Jill Dolan and others have demonstrated, this is a problematic issue for feminist literary and dramatic historians.¹² The traditional rules for entering the canon are definers of 'universality'. That universality is usually understood as something which transcends the historical moment and is generally commercially profitable as a result. These 'rules' are then used to value plays. As feminist criticism points out, 'universality' assumes a generic audience, and this assumption reinforces and reproduces hegemonic cultural and economic structures that have traditionally been exclusive of women.¹³ The inclusion of a text by a woman playwright into such a canon is complicated when considering that one of the aims of feminist dramatic criticism is to deconstruct the canon and its underlying ideology.

The big question is, according to Dolan, how should a woman's play 'be compared to this self-perpetuating list of male novels and plays, which expands its ranks only for

⁹ For full details of these publications, please consult the bibliography.

¹⁰ Julie Holledge is the series editor of this project, published by Australasian Drama Studies Teaching Texts.

¹¹ Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era*, Manchester, 1992, p. 154.

¹² See for example Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Ann Arbor, 1988.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 20.

those works that already resemble its historical members?'¹⁴ Dolan admits that she has a mistrust of institutional approval and, although her critique of the canon is valid, she offers no real solution for those seeking to alter radically the way in which history should treat the achievements of women in theatre, except to quote Christine Froula's views on how to approach traditional texts which devalue women. Froula suggests that such texts should be read not as the '..."best" that has been thought and said in the world, but as a *visible* past against which we can...imagine a different future'.¹⁵ My belief is that at some stage imagining against the past must be translated into something concrete so that it may be more easily shared. The easiest way to achieve that is through publication, which inevitably pits itself against what is already published, some of which comprises the dramatic canon. Without this engagement, those histories which imagine the theatrical past with a misplaced idea about women's participation in that history will continue to act as authorities. While value systems which measure dramatic and theatrical worth—both contemporary and historical—continue to operate, feminist intervention into the creation and maintenance of the canon is more profitable than outright rejection of its principles.

One of the benefits of joining the canon game that feminists are often reluctant to play is change that embraces difference is (hypothetically) possible. Perhaps more importantly, it insists on a rigorous monitoring of the quality and alertness of feminist criticism itself. It has been constantly reiterated in this thesis that uncritical recovery of women's theatre history is a dangerous enterprise. When feminists critics praise feminist theatre histories, they often do so with good intentions that backfire because they neglect to conform to unpopular canonical standards of evaluation. One thing that the canon never forgets to do is to measure newcomers against itself, and this burdens the critic with acknowledging and measuring past achievements. In this sense, there is something to be said for the protectionist rigour of the canon.

Unfortunately, Katherine Kelly neglected to do this in her review of the book *New Woman Plays*, edited by Linda Fitzsimmons and Viv Gardner. Kelly very correctly points

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 40.

out that this book, which she clearly frames as a 'recovery collection', indicates that 'the canon of "modern drama" has at last come due for...revision'. Although she quotes the example of Innes who in *Modern British Drama* champions no other woman playwright of the period except Elizabeth Robins as symptomatic of the need for such revision, it would be polite to recognise that neither she nor the book she is reviewing were the first to redress that absence. Neglecting to mention Julie Holledge's groundbreaking work, to cite one example, is to imply that the tradition of feminist scholarship in this area is decades younger than it actually is, which is something the editors of the collection she is reviewing have certainly acknowledged. Kelly is right, the publications of these plays will contribute to the restructuring of the canon, and have implications 'for the stature and innovativeness routinely assigned to the early pioneers of the Ibsen coterie'.¹⁶ Nevertheless, and no matter how 'correct' Kelly's feminist sentiments are, there is little point in reinventing the wheel by uncritically applauding every new published account of women and theatre as the first viable attack upon the canon. Until women's theatre history first and foremost measures itself against itself as well as against the canon, and until better options are felt for women theatre workers and historians as a result of engagement in this critical debate, meaningful change can not occur.

From suffrage to sufferance? Hope and feminist theatre history

Theatre historians need to be asking big questions, big enough to make answers worth finding, conclusions worth reaching, and results worth applying to a larger world. This thesis began as an unguided mystery tour, asking if there are any Australian suffrage playwrights and why that is worth knowing. Later, as evidence and sources emerged, another question arose: do these answers have to be meaningful for everyone? meaningful for Australian historians? for women playwrights? for theatre historiography? for feminist scholarship? for my father? for my bus driver? What can the sharing of history hope to achieve if we are unable to learn from its lessons, as it is so often evident that we do not? Wars continue, as do feminist campaign begun last century, with the hopes of peace and

¹⁶ Katherine Kelly, review of Fitzsimmons and Gardner (eds), *New Woman Plays*, *Theatre Journal*, vol 46, no 3, October 1994, p. 430-31.

resolution continually frustrated. Peggy Phelan discusses this despair in the context of contemporary performance: 'Hope keeps throwing us up and dropping us down. The time keeps moving and promising us new histories and we keep reproducing the same collapsing cities...What would it take to rewrite his/story? Invent a different city?'¹⁷ If the telling of history can achieve anything beyond entertainment, then it is the promise of hope, and the promise of 'new cities' to live different lives in. How exactly does the telling of history create that hope? This question is of particular concern to the feminist theatre historian.

History—the past—is about all of us, but the recounting of history has betrayed that truth. Historiography has created the exclusions, the lies. Feminist theory has done much to redress that, but even feminist historiography reveals its own inadequacies. In the race to correctly interpret the past, informed by recent philosophical and theoretical advancements, historians continue to tripe over that divide between past and present in what continually reveals itself to be the impossible enterprise of 'knowing' what happened. For theatre historians, this paradoxical pursuit is lent another layer of absurdity because we seek to locate knowledge of a truth that disappeared the moment it was spoken, never to be repeated. If performance is ephemeral, then what is performance history but the chasing of history's finest dust? And to what cause?

As historians berate and/or congratulate other historians for their 'lies' and 'truths', the task of locating Australian suffrage theatre history must engage in that same game of inclusion and exclusion in order to do battle. Afterwards, what lesson will those stories from the past lend to us now, and for the future? Some things about this history have a distinctive resonance well worth hearing, in particular that white colonial Australia has a unique cultural history that has been long disregarded by both theatre historians and others who lament the assumed lack of tradition in female dramatic writing in Australia. Australian suffrage playwrights greatly contributed to that uniqueness. Longer enfranchised and internationally mobile, their writing and work was the first to voice

¹⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, London, 1993, p. 178.

feminist qualms about the limitations of the vote, and to express those angsts through performance.

This thesis belongs to an intellectual tradition in Australia that has long asked who we are, and what have we meant, and what do we mean, to ourselves, and the rest of the world. These are the favourite questions of many historians, but they have particular resonance in postcolonial Australia. Maybe these questions do interest my bus driver. They certainly interested the women whose dramatic negotiations are considered in this story, women who led vital lives amid times of great change, chased dreams, fell over them, and flew with them. Their quests have left a salient legacy, once faded but now polished—slightly. Are these polished secrets worth sharing? Despite my fear of misrepresentation, that risk has to be taken. As Peggy Phelan argues, 'the unavoidability of misunderstanding leads me to believe that this mistaking *is* history, the history in front of us no less than the history behind us. This is the history we recite and always rewrite'.¹⁸ In that spirit, this thesis is offered as part of a continuum that is needed and welcomed but still recognises and hopes for its own disappearance.

'Truth' becomes harder and harder to locate in the late twentieth century. Just as the dreams of emancipation projected by Australian suffrage playwrights continue to waver, their reception still unsure almost a century later, so too do many of today's humanitarian visions falter. 'That being so, why do we go on?', as Miles Franklin once rhetorically asked, encouraging another writer not to succumb to defeat.¹⁹ This story reveals that Australian suffrage theatre, undefeated, shared dreams of a better future, dreams that often first told lies in the hope that they might later become true. Perhaps theatre should continue to tell the biggest lies of all, so that we do go on dreaming. Theatre is illusion and history is reality—albeit an unknowable one—but in order to imagine a different future feminist theatre historiography must continue to marry the hope of 'new cities' that is contained in both.

¹⁸ Peggy Phelan, 'Reciting the Citation of Others; or, A Second Introduction', Hart & Phelan (eds), *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, Ann Arbor, 1993, p. 17.

¹⁹ Letter to Pixie O'Harris, 3 September 1954, quoted in Jill Roe (ed), *My Congenials: Miles Franklin and Friends in Letters*, vol II, Pymble, 1993, p. 352.

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